



# A Comparison of Preschool and First Grade Teachers' Views about School Readiness

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## Abstract

School readiness is an important concern for parents and teachers because it is a multifaceted process which encompasses all the developmental areas and various skills of children rather than only focusing on cognitive and literacy skills. In particular, preschool and first grade teachers experience the positive and negative sides of the process of school readiness. In this study, basic qualitative research was used to compare teachers' views about school readiness. The participants were 35 preschool and 35 first grade teachers and a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers was used to collect data. Qualitative analysis was performed at the end of the study and according to the findings, the following five main themes were determined: definition of school readiness, the effective people and institutions in the school readiness process, preschool education for school readiness, the difficulties encountered in the school readiness process and suggestions for effective school readiness. Also, the findings showed that preschool and first grade teachers tended to have similar views related school readiness.

## Key Words

School Readiness, Preschool Education, Preschool Teachers, First Grade Teachers, Teachers' View.

The transition between educational grades is a critical period for children, parents, teachers and schools (Amundson, 1999; Steen, 2011; Winter & Kelley, 2008). In particular, the parents and teachers are concerned about the transition to first grade in which young children will be engaged in more academic activities (Winter & Kelley, 2008), which requires the child to be well prepared (Bilgili & Yurtal, 2009). School readiness not

only consists of the development of cognitive and literacy skills (Winter & Kelley, 2008) but covers all developmental domains of children such as physical, social, emotional and language (Halle, Hair, Wandner, & Chien, 2012; McTurk, Lea, Robinson, Nutton, & Carapetis, 2011; Morrison, 2011). The main aim of the readiness process is to provide children with a smooth transition to first grade (Winter & Kelley, 2008).

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Preschool education is thought to be important for the smooth transition to first grade (Okon & Wilgocka-Okon, 1973; Wolf & Kessler, 1987). This is supported by Erkan and Kırca (2010) searched the effect of preschool education on 170 young children's school readiness and found that children who had preschool experience were more ready than other peers. Similarly another study conducted by Magnusan, Meyers, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2004), it was emphasized that preschool education was especially important for children from low income families and had a positive impact on the children's reading and math skills. Also, Aboud and Hossain (2011) emphasized that preschool education increased children's academic success in further education. However, there are some anxieties about that although young children may attend preschool they may still have some problems when starting first grade. Kotaman (2009) reported that although children gained some skills for first grade in preschool classrooms, it would not be easy to adapt to less child-centered and more structured first grade classrooms after the preschool classroom in which the activities and relationships between child and teacher are more flexible.

In the available research, certain important points were made concerning children's readiness for first grade and facilitating the transition between grades. Consistency and persistence between programs of two grades makes the readiness process more meaningful and supports easy transition (McTurk et al., 2011). Also, preschool and first grade teachers sharing information and experiences, and the consistency of their educational philosophies make positive contributions to the process (LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008). However, Love, Logue, Trudeau, and Thayer (1992) emphasized that only 10% of first grade teachers contacted with preschool teachers of their students.

The literature review showed that many studies have been conducted in relation to school readiness and school transition. For instance, teachers' judgments about prevalence and types of problems of children in transition process (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), kindergarten teacher's views of children's readiness for school (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003) and educators' views of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten readiness and transition practices (Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006) were investigated, in addition beliefs of parents and teachers about readiness for kindergarten (West, Germino-Hausken, & Collins, 1993) and, preschool and kindergarten teachers' views on school readiness

from several countries (Gillis, 2007) were compared. Also, some pre-kindergarten programs (Freeman & Brown, 2008), experiences of teachers, parents and children during the transition process (Chan, 2010), views of first grade students about preschool education and first grade education (Loizou, 2011), parents' and teachers' perceptions of transition practices in kindergarten (Petraokos & Lehrer, 2011), and effects of structural qualities of houses (Unutkan, 2007), orientation week (Bilgili & Yurtal, 2009), summer kindergarten orientation programs (Berlin, Dunning, & Dodge, 2011), an educational program for the smooth transition (Carida, 2011) and Montessori program (Kayılı & Arı, 2011) on school readiness were investigated. Moreover, writing readiness of 6 year-old children (Yangin, 2007) and possible relationships between the readiness and reading and writing performances of first graders (Yangin, 2009) were explored. Although the teacher is a key factor for the smooth and happy transition of children to first grade (Morrison, 2008), there are limited studies related to comparing preschool and first grade teachers' views about school readiness. Also, the views and consistency of the views of these teachers are critical for the positive and effective transition and readiness process. Therefore, the aim of this study was to discover and compare preschool and first grade teachers' views about school readiness.

## Method

### Research Design

Basic qualitative research was used to elicit and compare teachers' views about school readiness in this study. Merriam (2009) stated that all qualitative research focused on how people gave meaning to their lives and the world. The main aim of basic qualitative research is to discover and interpret this meaning. It is also emphasized that basic qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon and a viewpoint through interviews, observations and document reviews (Merriam, 1998). The current study attempts to elicit preschool and first grade teachers' views about school readiness through interviews and then compared them. Since there was no intention to focus on a specific culture or to build a new theory, basic qualitative research was used in this study.

### Participants

The participants of this study were selected purposefully to get rich information (Patton, 2002) and consisted of 35 preschool and 35 first

grade teachers working in public and private schools. All the early childhood teachers in this study were female and most of them (n=33) worked in public schools. While most (n=23, 65.7%) have a bachelor's degree from an Early Childhood Education department, nine teachers (25.7%) graduated from the department of Child Development and Vocational Education Faculty. In addition, three teachers (8.5%) have a bachelor's degree from Preschool Education. Their teaching experience was between 1 year and 27 years, and most of them (n=20, 57.1%) were mid-career teachers (4-15 years) (McMullen et al., 2006).

Most of the first grade teachers (n=24, 68.5%) were male and all of them (n=35) worked in public schools. While most (n=27, 77.1%) have a bachelor's degree from a Primary School Teaching department, a few teachers had graduated from Vocational School (n=3, 8.5%), a history department (n=2, 5.7%), an Education Institution (n=2, 5.7%) and a Faculty of Agriculture (n=1, 2.8%). Their teaching experience varied between 3 years and 35 years. Most of the first grade teachers (n=23, 65.7%) were veteran (more than 15 years' experience) (McMullen et al., 2006).

#### Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researchers to obtain the preschool and first grade teachers' views about school readiness. A semi-structured protocol gave the researchers the opportunity to gain an idea about the general flow of the interview but they sometimes asked additional questions (Nunan, 1992). Initially, based on the related literature, the first draft of the protocol containing 20 questions was created. Then, views of three experts in the field of preschool education, primary school teaching and qualitative research were asked to verify the content and face validity of the protocol. After their approval, the interview protocol was piloted with two preschool and two first grade teachers. Then, some questions were removed and the experts' opinions were asked once more. The final interview protocol consisted of 5 demographic and 9 main questions related to the teachers' views about school readiness.

#### Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected during February, March and April 2012 in Ankara and Tokat, Turkey. Before the data collection, one of the researchers visited

schools and talked to the teachers about the aim of the study. Then, the teachers, who volunteered to be interviewed, signed a consent form. The researcher who would carry out the interviews with the teacher explained that she wanted to make audio recording in order to capture all their responses and furthermore to save the time involved in handwriting the teachers' responses. However, some teachers (n=22) did not permit this recording and the researcher wrote their responses by hand. The interviews were carried out on a one to one basis at a convenient place and time determined by the teachers in their schools. The duration of the interviews varied between 30 min and 60 min.

#### Data Analysis

The researchers transcribed the interviews that were recorded and handwritten. Then, two of the researchers read the transcripts several times to gain an overall idea about the interviews. For the qualitative data analysis, *word repetitions* technique was used (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Coders separately listed unique words used by participants. For example; *literacy* is an important word for school readiness. The coders listed this and similar words and determined the repetition. The frequency of use of these words provided the coders with important clues in deciding on the themes. At the end of the study according to findings, five main themes were determined; (1) definition of school readiness, (2) effective people and institutions in the school readiness process, (3) preschool education for school readiness, (4) the difficulties encountered in the school readiness process and (5) suggestions for effective school readiness.

#### Trustworthiness

There are several strategies to provide validity in qualitative studies. *Peer review* is used as trustworthiness strategy in this study. The researchers discussed the research process and findings with their colleagues who had experience in preschool education and primary school teaching. This strategy provided the researchers with a critical assessment of their interpretations (Johnson, 1997; Krefting, 1991).

Inter-coder agreement was the main focus of establishment of this study (Creswell, 2007). The data was coded by two researchers who had experience in qualitative research and qualitative data analysis. Initially, they coded data separately

and reached agreement on about 90% of the codes. When they disagreed, they referred to the literature however, they were unable to agree on 4% of data therefore it is not reported in this paper.

## Results

### Definition of School Readiness

While defining school readiness, preschool and first grade teachers used various keywords related to physical, social/emotional and cognitive readiness and the language and self-help skills of children. Also, they explained how they assessed children's readiness for first grade.

### Effective People and Institutions in the School Readiness Process

Most of preschool and first grade teachers (n=43) emphasized that the most effective institution in readiness process was family. Also, there were teachers who stated the teacher (n=11), school (n=5) or child (n=4) was the most effective person or institution in this process.

### Preschool Education for School Readiness

In relation to preschool education for school readiness, teachers focused on aims of preschool education, importance of the preschool education and the teaching of reading and writing in preschool. The findings showed that most of the preschool (n=25) and first grade (n=21) teachers were aware that preparing children for primary education was one of the aims of preschool education. In terms of the importance of preschool education, all of the participant teachers emphasized that preschool experience was very important for school readiness but they gave different reasons why preschool education was necessary. Lastly, most of the teachers (n=49) stated that teaching reading and writing in preschool would have a negative effect on children.

### The Difficulties Encountered in the School Readiness Process

When asked about the difficulties encountered in the school readiness process, teachers usually focused those encountered in the process of transition to school. They explained that they particularly experienced difficulties related to conducting academic activities and managing the children's behaviors.

### Suggestions for Effective School Readiness

The participant teachers gave their suggestions for parents, children, teachers, schools and practices that would make school readiness process easier and more effective. In relation to the parents, they stated that parents should establish cooperation with the school (n=16), have information about preschool education and primary education (n=14), help children build positive attitudes to primary education (n=6), take care of children (n=2) and reward them (n=2). In terms of the children, fifteen teachers stated that children should attend preschool before starting first grade. For teachers, the suggestions were mainly aimed at preschool teachers. For instance, they said preschool teachers should aim to enhance all the developmental domains of children (n=12), plan age appropriate and enjoyable school readiness activities (n=9), visit first grade classrooms (n=5) and communicate with first grade teachers (n=3). In relation to schools and practices, the teachers tended have differing views but it is important to mention that in this study, eight teachers stated that preschool education should be compulsory in Turkey.

## Discussion

The views of preschool and first grade teachers about school readiness were elicited and compared in this study. The findings showed that most of the participant teachers considered that all developmental domains were important for children's school readiness. This finding is consistent with studies that mentioned that physical, social-emotional, cognitive and language skills of young children should be enhanced in the school readiness process (Farran, 2011; Halle et al., 2012; McTurk et al., 2011; Morrison, 2011).

According to the findings, preschool and first grade teachers stated that the most effective institution in readiness process is the family. Parallel to this finding, Chan (2010) reported that participants of his study emphasized that a smooth transition to primary education might be possible with the effective cooperation of parents with preschool and primary school teachers. Also, in the study by Halle et al. (2012) investigating the effects of characteristics of the child, family, classroom, teachers and the program on 4-year old children's school readiness process one of the results was that age of the child, family structure, educational level of parents and teachers, and quality of the classroom were important in this process.

In relation to preschool education for school readiness most of the participant teachers in the current study were aware that preparing children for primary education was one of the aims of preschool education as emphasized in Turkish Preschool Program (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2006). Also, all of the participant teachers emphasized that preschool experience was very important for school readiness. This is supported by Erkan (2011) who studied 179 first grade children and reported that children who had preschool experience were more ready for first grade than their peers who had not attended preschool education. Interestingly, most participant teachers in the current study were against the teaching of reading and writing in preschool. These views of teachers may result from their experiences and observations. One reason may be that, first grade teachers would have to plan and conduct extra activities for literate children.

In terms of the difficulties encountered in the school readiness process, teachers tended to comment that it was not easy for young children to adapt to more academic and teacher-directed activities in first grade classrooms. Also, obeying more strict rules and limiting the behaviors in the classroom are problems for children in the transition period. Similarly, Chan (2010) and Loizou (2011) stressed that children starting first grade thought that the structured courses and strict rules of teachers as negative experiences and they had problems in keeping silent and sitting on the chair for a long time.

Lastly, the participant teachers generally made suggestions for parents to provide children with experiences of smooth transition to first grade. This might result from the teachers considering that the family is the most effective institution in the readiness process. Also, in literature it has been emphasized that the most common transition activity in schools is meetings with children and parents before starting the first grade (Petraikos & Lehrer, 2011).

In conclusion, the aim of education in 21<sup>st</sup> century is to prepare children for lifelong learning rather than school exams (Kay, 2010). In order to achieve this aim, the importance of preschool education and primary education cannot be ignored. The findings of the study showed that preschool and first grade teachers usually had similar views related to school readiness. The teachers had parallel views especially about enhancing all the developmental areas, importance of parents and preschool education, and consistency of preschool program and first grade program.

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