Teacher Views about the Starting Age of the First Grade Elementary School

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Abstract

This research critically investigated the implementation in Turkey of starting elementary-school first grade at age 5 (60 months) according to teacher feedback. While the study is designed as qualitative, a kind of single case study approach is used with a group of 50 volunteer first-grade teachers serving in 15 elementary schools in the Eskişehir city center. In forming the group, a purposeful sampling technique was used from criterion sampling. The data were obtained through interviews held in March and April 2013, and the descriptive method was used for data analysis. Some important findings were: Reducing the age to 5 has caused so many differences in both age (a range of more than 12 months) and readiness level that the gaps between students of different readiness levels have become even wider, and many difficulties have been encountered in their education and training. Starting the first grade earlier had negative effects on students' physical, cognitive, and mental development, and it adversely affected not only the students, but also the teachers, who want to abandon this implementation. The study found that the age of 6 remains appropriate for starting the first grade of elementary school.

Key Words

First Grade, School Maturity, Schooling Age, Starting School Earlier.

Preschool/kindergarten is the first step in school, and at this level, it is essential to educate children through games rather than academic study. In the first grade, children encounter school life and educational activities, with its particular discipline, for the first time. Therefore, children need school readiness to fulfill the first grade's curricular requirements. However, the criterion for starting school in Turkey is age 5, as determined by law. For many years, it was age 6 (72 months) for first grade, and then in 2012, it was amended to 5 years old (60 months) (Resmi Gazete, 2012). A year later, the law was again amended, so that for a year, parents could postpone the start of school for a child aged 60–65. They could petition to postpone a child of 66–68 months from starting school; and obtaining a medical certificate could postpone a child of 69–71 months from starting school (Resmi Gazete, 2012). After the age 5 law was implemented for two years in 1983-1985, these practices were abandoned because of the problems experienced (Güçlü, 2012). Without adequate examination of this failed implementation and without comprehensive portrayal of 5-year-olds' school readiness, the starting age has been reduced to 5 years. However, in many developed countries, the starting age remains 6 years (Balcı, 2011). Nevertheless, many countries have prioritized preschool education instead of reducing the starting age. In developed countries, the ratings of benefits from preschool education have been quite high, and constant study of preschool education has helped improve its quality and efficiency (Erkan & Kırca, 2010).

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Beginning school without a certain level of readiness tends to end in failure, afflicting children emotionally (Erkan & Kırca, 2010). Trying to teach a child who is not ready to learn is not only inefficient, but can also cause the child failure, frustration, and feelings of inferiority. Students in such circumstances, even having matured sufficiently, do not dare do things their peers do (Bilir, 2005). Experiences with uncontrolled stress factors, even if these factors can be controlled afterward, cause children to remain passive (Terry, 2011). Therefore, determination of readiness level for learning, and accordingly, the organization of teaching activities, is very important (Taşdemir, 2012).

As many studies have shown, lack of school readiness can result in the child experiencing a variety of problems and might lead to estrangement from school. Determination of readiness for academic tasks can ensure that children are successful in their first school-related experience (Bağçeli Kahraman & Başal, 2013; Oktay, 2010). If students do not have the preconditions required for the first learning units, they cannot learn at the desired level. No effort, encouragement, incentive, reward, or education services can provide a predetermined level of learning (Bloom, 1998). Therefore, in many countries, children take readiness tests, and individual children's multidirectional maturity is evaluated (Erkan & Kırca, 2010). Studies have focused seriously on findings that some children cannot meet the demands of school and programmed learning no matter what age they start school. Therefore, in determining when a child should begin school, other factors besides age should be considered (Oktay, 2010) because learning readiness is related to the student's knowledge, abilities, interests, habits, and values. Forming efficient learning experiences when these elements are not considered is very difficult (Fidan, 1996). The term *readiness* includes maturation level, including the individual's prior learning, interests, attitudes, motivation levels, abilities, and general health status (Gibson & Vinegradoff, 1986 as cited in Senemoğlu, 2007). School readiness includes the child's experiences and skills from birth to the beginning of school life and means the child is ready to fulfill the school's expectations successfully. School readiness is a multifaceted concept; it is based on children's developing social, emotional, physical, and mental growth (Childcare Health Program, 2006; Ülkü, 2007). Factors affecting primary school readiness are generally described as physiological, mental, emotional, and social (Cinkılıç, 2009; Çelenk, 2008; Özkesemen, 2008; Teke, 2010). However, we must remember that school maturity is a relative concept —varying from individual to individual.

Some children reach school readiness at 5 and some at 8 (Yavuzer, 1997).

School readiness is crucially important in the first grade because of early literacy instruction. First literacy instruction actually affects an individual's future life (Yıldız, 2010), and is one of the first conditions that bring success in life. Acquisition of reading and writing, the first step in the functional stages of future writing and reading habits, has great importance (Gülbaş Çatak, 2008). Children disadvantaged in terms of developmental characteristics have difficulty learning to read and write. If these children are unduly forced in their learning, the danger of a negative attitude toward any literacy activities, or even any teaching activities, arises (Çelenk, 2001). If students' physiological and psychological abilities to use the native language and their degree of dealing with books, and so on, at the beginning of school year are not recognized, the effort spent teaching is less likely to obtain the desired result (Öz, 1999).

Although there are different views about the age at which children should begin first grade, that they must reach a level of development high enough to attain reading is widely agreed upon (Childcare Health Program, 2006; Sharp, 1998, 2002). Havighurst (1972) draws attention to the importance of literacy readiness; additionally, their chronological age must be at least 6.5 to reach to highest condition of basic skills (as cited in Kılıççı, 1992). However, for the 2012–2013 academic year in Turkey, the beginning age was set at 5 years (60 months). This is an issue that should be investigated, and this study examined the implementation of beginning at age 5 according to teachers' opinions.

Method

Research Design

The qualitative research method of phenomenology was used in this study. Qualitative research is conducted to investigate problems and produce solutions that occur in practice and to reveal individual perceptions or viewpoints related to a specific phenomenon. Phenomenological design focuses on a something of which we are aware, but about which we have no deep, detailed comprehension (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). Phenomena occur in our world in different ways, for instance, as events, experiences, perceptions, intentions, concepts, and situations. Phenomenology thus constitutes appropriate ground for studying the age at which children should begin school and the maturity they need to be successful.

Participants

The study was conducted at elementary schools in the city center of Eskişehir. The schools were designated with stratified sampling to encompass the properties of school and students as much as possible. The list of designated schools was grouped into lower, medium, and upper socioeconomic status, and five schools from each group were chosen at random. To ensure impartial study results, the researcher chose an equal number of schools at each SES level. The criterion sampling technique, a purposeful sampling method, was used to form the participant groups. The criteria for teacher participation were the following: at least 5 years seniority, having taught in the same school during that time, and having taught first grade for at least a year when the age of starting school was 6. The teachers from these 15 elementary schools were appropriate for the criteria and accepted for interviews; 50 teachers were chosen to participate.

Data Collection Tool

As a data collection tool, a semi-structured interview form was improved by the researcher. Through a pre-interview, eight first-grade teachers were asked to write their opinions about the implementation of 5-year-olds entering first grade. After reviewing the literature and analyzing the pre-interviews, the researcher determined 11 questions for the interview form. These questions were then carefully reviewed by three experts who had earned licenses and a master's degree as classroom teachers. After copious feedback from these experts, the interview form was restructured in consideration of their opinions. In fact, all three experts commented similarly. During the analytical process, another researcher was also consulted during classification of the data according to theme. The formula of reliability [reliability = agreement/(agreement + disagreement)] suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used for coherence of estimation between the studies, and as a result, the research's reliability was determined to be over 80 percent.

Data Collection Procedures

In this study, the data was collected by interviewing people who had an interest in the research question and could supply deep information (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2009). The interviews were conducted with the teacher-participants in May and April 2003. Before the interviews, pre-interviews were conducted with the teachers, and the research purpose and contribution were clarified. The interview questions were supplied to the participants, so they could consider them carefully. During the actual interview, the participants were asked open-ended questions. The researcher took notes of their answers on the interview forms. After the interview, these notes were immediately organized and shared with the participants. The participants added opinions and finally, approved the notes. To increase the research's external reliability, the researcher described the interview process in detail.

Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis technique was applied to the data by deeply examining and then coding it. Prior to descriptive analysis, themes were determined through consideration of the study's purpose and the interview questions. The participants' answers for each question were divided as to themes, the list was formed, and the results were defined and explained. To preserve confidentiality, the teachers' names were replaced with codes: K1, K2, … K50.

Results and Discussion

In Turkey, in 2012, the age for beginning the first grade was determined at 5 years (60 months) (Resmi Gazete, 2012). This was later interpreted as: 60–65 months if the parents wished, 66–68 months by petition of the parents, and 69–71 months with a medical certificate (Resmi Gazete, 2013). This situation created many classroom differences in terms of both age and level of readiness, giving rise to many difficulties in education and training. Students who lacked readiness were found to have difficulty performing activities and to finish their work late; hence, they felt boredom, reluctance, and lack of self-confidence. In contrast, students who were ready for school became bored, and their interest in the courses decreased. Bağçeli Kahraman and Başal (2013) have stated that some children are not ready for first grade, and starting them anyway can cause various problems that might distract the child from school. Çelenk (2001) has drawn attention to the danger of the child assuming a negative attitude toward all kinds of literacy activities and even against all kinds of teaching activities if children who are not developmentally ready are forced to learn to read and write.

In Turkey, having students with various levels of readiness in first-grade has caused individual and classroom problems. Bloom (1998) observed that incomplete learning ability in the first instructional unit would return as shortcomings in the second unit and then further increase. Too, Bilir (2005) has drawn attention to first-year students showing great differences in capability, speed of development, interests, needs, and school readiness levels. Likewise, the Childcare Health Program (2006) has emphasized the importance of readiness for starting school.

In his study, Keskinkılıç (2002) has drawn attention to the importance of recognizing the students and orienting them to the program. He revealed that the orientation program bored children who attended kindergarten or were over 66 months old. However, students who had not attended kindergarten and younger students find it difficult and tiring. Additionally, the program has been found incomplete and inadequate in terms of content and materials; since teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about the program, they have difficulty implementing it.

In younger age groups, children have been found to have adjustment problems, for instance, difficulty in using scissors, and taking care of toilet and nutritional needs. In friendships and relationships among mixed-aged classes, such problems as grouping into age groups, difficulties in communicating, disagreements, exclusion, fighting, oppressing smaller children, and not attending games have occurred. It should be noted that each new stage of life bears the imprint of the previous. This readies us for the next stage and helps us to adapt easily, or else we are faced with various challenges (Oktay, 2010). Thus, we must always bear in mind that these problems' deep traces will emerge in children's later life because early initiation has affected them negatively in terms of physical, emotional, and mental development. Students who have not developed to the appropriate readiness level become tired and bored, they learn late and hard, they immediately forget what they have learned, and they lag behind in the coursework; attracting and holding their attention is difficult. Karbuğa, (2011) observed that a child suffering while holding a pen correctly tires very quickly and has difficulty performing writing activities; of course, this adversely affects other educational events. Kılıççı (1992) has focused on how children expend serious efforts to achieve what is expected of them in the first years of elementary school, and if they fail, their self-esteem is weakened.

Furthermore, the parents of young children often have difficulties, and the classroom and the school's physical conditions can affect incoming first graders adversely. Whether children are ready for school depends on families, preschool environments, schools, and society as a whole (Childcare Health Program, 2006). All these factors should be taken into account before a child starts school.

For success in first grade, kindergarten has been shown necessary, and students need to come to first grade through preschool (or kindergarten). Senemoğlu (1994) emphasized that certain child development skills or qualifications must be gained in preschool before beginning elementary school. The results of several studies on preschool education in regard to children's school readiness reveal preschools' positive impact (Cinkılıç, 2009; Erkan & Kırca, 2010; Özkesemen, 2008; Teke, 2010).

In the Turkish situation, first classes separated according to age groups should be implemented in order for them to be more effective and functional. Yangın (2007) argued for forming groups according to students' readiness levels and then building a learning environment with appropriate activities for each group. In fact, the implementation of beginning first grade at age 5 has negatively affected not only students, but also teachers: teachers are unhappy and want to abandon this implementation. This study has revealed that the starting age for schoolchildren should be returned to the previous age of 6 years (72 months).

If the starting age of 5 for first grade continues, however, arrangements need to be made on the following issues, among many others: Because having students with different readiness in the same class negatively affects students, teachers, and the learning process, different first-grade classes must be established according to age and/or level of readiness. Because the orientation program is boring for children who went to kindergarten or are over 66 months old, but is inadequate for others, different orientation programs should be provided for classes with different readiness levels. Next, the class schedule should be revised according to different age–readiness groups, with the course materials accurately reflecting each specific group. Furthermore, teachers should receive comprehensive in-service training on how to educate younger or less ready students. Parents should be informed of this revised implementation process. To address the readiness issue directly, research students can administer school-readiness tests to children starting school.

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