

First Grade Students' Perceptions of Their Preschool and Elementary School Experience*

Nefise Semra Erkanⁱ
Hacettepe University

İlknur Tarmanⁱⁱ
Özel Mba Okulları

Zeynep Seda Şanlıⁱⁱⁱ
Zafer Koleji

Yekta Koşan
Hacettepe University^{iv}

Işıl Ömrüuzun^v
Zümrüt Anaokulu

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to reveal first grade students' perceptions of their preschool and elementary school experience. Phenomenological research design was used in this qualitative study. Participants were twenty first grade students who had attended preschool. The data were obtained by using semi-structured interviews and pictures drawn by children, and analyzed by qualitative data analysis. The results showed that preschool, which offers an environment of play based activities, was perceived as a more enjoyable and desired place by children. The children also expressed that their elementary school experiences were based on rules, academic knowledge and skills in contrast to their preschool experience, and that elementary school entailed more duties and responsibilities.

Keywords: Preschool education, School perception, School readiness, Elementary school.

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ⁱ **Nefise Semra Erkan**, Prof. Dr., Hacettepe University, Department of Elementary Education, Division of Preschool Education, Ankara/Turkey.

ⁱⁱ **İlknur Tarman**, Dr., Özel MBA Okulları, Turkey.

Correspondence: tarmanilknur@gmail.com

ⁱⁱⁱ **Zeynep Seda Şanlı**, Zafer Koleji, Preschool Education, Turkey.

^{iv} **Yekta Koşan**, Res. Assist., Hacettepe University, Department of Elementary Education, Division of Preschool Education, Ankara/Turkey.

^v **Işıl Ömrüuzun**, Zümrüt Anaokulu, Preschool Education, Ankara/Turkey.

Introduction

The transition from preschool to elementary school is a critical moment at the onset of children's formal education. The health and quality of this transition is vital for future school experiences. Therefore, preschool education is crucial not only for meeting children's cognitive, social, emotional, motor, linguistic and self-care needs, but also for a comfortable and smooth transition to elementary school.

The process of transition to elementary school and the factors affecting this process have been investigated by many researchers (White et al., 1996; Louizou, 2011; Aksoy and Baran, 2010; Spilt et al., 2010; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; White, 2013; Yeboah, 2014; Phelps et al., 2014; Chan, 2014; Akman, Kent Kükürtcü, Tarman and Şanlı, 2017). Many factors influence the transition to elementary school and the process of adapting to a new culture with its own rules and needs. These factors include:

- The contents and quality of preschool education,
- The approaches used in school readiness activities and their developmental appropriateness,
- The quality of children's social environment and the experiences their families offer them,
- Motivation and conditioning for the transition to elementary school.

A child who undergoes a healthy transition to elementary school is expected to be happy and motivated in their future school life.

Children's perceptions of the school experience directly affect their school lives. Their perceptions are based on the learning environments offered to them, their motivation level, developmental competence level, teacher attitudes, peer attitudes, family attitudes, physical qualities of the school and the performance expected from them at school.

Critical factors which enable children to start elementary school with a high readiness level and a positive school perception include the content and quality of their preschool education. While children receive education which meets their developmental needs at preschool, they also prepare for the next stage of their education, elementary school, and the beginning of their formal education process.

The most important responsibility in preschool education and the transition to elementary school naturally rests with preschool teachers. With their one-to-one relationship with children and their role of guide for learning, teachers are the most important element in the learning experience. The teacher-child relationship, which depends on teacher qualities, attitudes and approaches, helps shape children's school perceptions. Teachers leave indelible marks on children's learning and school perceptions with their subject area knowledge, how they reflect their personal qualities and skills in the classroom environment, their professional perspective and the classroom management approaches they use. A close and healthy relationship between children and the teacher improves school performance, class participation, feelings of competence and school perceptions (White, 2013). The school principal is another figure with which children communicate verbally and non-verbally throughout their school lives. Yalçın and Erginer (2014) investigated elementary school children's perceptions of the school principal and concluded that a positive, understanding and problem-solving attitude on the principal's part affects children's school perceptions and thoughts.

Children's perceived family attitudes and the social, emotional and physical facilities provided by the family are also important factors for school perceptions. Erkan and Kırca (2010) and Erkan (2011) emphasize the importance of the facilities provided by the family and the social environment

on children's elementary school readiness levels. A positive family attitude towards school life, family support, the motivation level families provide, and a cooperative approach on the family's part are all perceived positively by the child and lead to feelings of trust and belonging in the school. In a study of Vietnamese children, Phelps et al. (2014) found that children whose families were interested in what they learned at school were happy children.

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of the socio-cultural environment and its elements in the development of a child as an individual. Children's social environment comprises their family, teachers, peers, people in their immediate environment and their community. Depending on their roles, these people create different perceptions and experiences in a child's life. The verbal and nonverbal messages received from these people, their behaviors and approaches, the surrounding cultural context and the social environment enable children to form perceptions of themselves and their society. This study is based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, and evaluates the effects of the people and elements in children's social and physical environment on the formation of their school perceptions.

According to Vygotsky's theory, the child develops his perceptions through social interaction and by seeing himself as others see him (Sarı and Cenkseven, 2008; Moore, 2005; cited in Şanlı, 2012). While negative feedback, failure and judgmental reactions trigger higher levels of anxiety, children who feel valued and successful and are positively motivated have lower anxiety levels. Children who have access to a quality preschool education, find themselves in positive social and physical environments, feel understood and fairly treated, receive developmental support, and have adapted to their social environments also have a positive transition to school life.

The school climate involves elements such as the instructional environment, school rules and a fair approach based on love and trust, which in turn shape children's school perceptions. The instructional environment is a dynamic structure consisting of sub-elements such as school personnel, physical space, equipment, learning tools, and special arrangements. The physical environment is one of the dimensions of this structure and it includes the characteristics of the space assigned for educational activities (Arslan Karaküçük, 2008). Mahdjoubi and Akplotsyi (2012) showed in their study that children's affective perceptions and learning styles were shaped by the school's physical environment. The school's architectural qualities, lighting, colors, instructional materials, and the physical learning environment all affected children.

The transition from preschool to basic education is a milestone in a child's life. Many children face difficulties while adapting to this new situation. A great majority find it hard to cope with the requirements of basic education. This leads to negative school experiences and problems. Such negative experiences affect children's long term development, learning and stages of education. Many factors affect the transition from preschool to basic education, such as the new learning environment, school- and home-based factors, children's language and culture, and their personal qualities. A successful transition may be made possible by supporting and developing these factors. Many studies have been conducted in Turkey and elsewhere to investigate the transition to basic education from different perspectives (such as teacher beliefs and attitudes, family involvement and perspectives, programs and strategies for positive school readiness and smooth transition) (White et al., 1996; Louizou, 2011; Aksoy and Baran, 2010; Spilt et al., 2010; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; White, 2013; Yeboah, 2014; Phelps et al., 2014; Chan, 2014; Akman, Kent Kükürtcü, Tarman and Şanlı, 2017). Even though children are the real actors of the transition to basic education, studies of their perspective are small in number and have often been conducted outside Turkey (Aksoy and Baran, 2010; Yeboah, 2014; Phelps et al., 2014; Chan, 2014). Children are directly affected by this crucial process, and it is important for them to personally voice their experiences, expectations, needs, wants and emotions. It is hoped that this study will help reveal children's positive and negative experiences in the transition from preschool to basic education and guide future studies for a successful transition.

This study aims to reveal the perceptions of first grade students who have been through preschool about their preschool and elementary school experiences from their own voices. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What are children's positive experiences in the transition from preschool to grade 1?
2. What are the difficulties that children face in the transition from preschool to grade 1?
3. What are children's perceptions of their preschool and elementary school teachers?
4. What are children's perceptions of the educational environment in their preschool and elementary school?
5. What are children's perceptions of the physical environment in their preschool and elementary school?

Method

Study Model

The study used the qualitative research design of phenomenology. In phenomenology studies, “data sources include individuals or groups that are experiencing the phenomenon at the heart of the study and that can reveal or represent this phenomenon” (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2013, p.20). This model was chosen in order to enable each child to interpret their transition from preschool to grade 1 in relation to their own experiences.

Study Group

The study group comprised 20 first graders who were attending elementary schools located in Ankara and affiliated with the Ministry of Education, who had received preschool education. For validity reasons and in order to include a wide array of experiences, the students were chosen from different elementary schools.

Data Collection Tools

Data in this study were obtained with the method of free flow/chat type interviews based on certain basic questions in order to determine elementary school first graders’ perceptions of their preschool and elementary school experiences. Children were encouraged to describe and compare their preschool and current elementary school experiences. The literature was reviewed to write the basic open-ended questions used in the interviews with children. Then, expert views were taken and adjustments were made to the items. The intelligibility of interview questions were checked with a pilot trial with five first grade students, and they were finalized after taking expert views once again.

Another tool used in data collection was children's drawings. These not only present a criterion to understand children psycho-pedagogically, but are also tools of expression that reflect their emotions, thoughts and inner lives. Children use drawings to complete their inner experiences and perceptions, and to relate their outer experiences and perceptions with their external environments (Çiçekler and Koruklu, 2013). In this study, children were asked to draw a picture depicting their preschool experiences on one side of the drawing paper, and their grade 1 experiences on the other side of it. They were also invited to talk about their drawings. Using this method in conjunction with interviews yielded a better understanding of how children evaluated both environments and gave the opportunity to double-check children's comments during the interviews. The semi-structured interviews with children and their descriptions of their drawings were audio recorded.

Data Collection Process

Data collection started three months after the beginning of the school year so that the children could reflect on and compare the two experiences. The researchers first met with school administrators, explained the purpose of the study, and obtained their consent for working with

children. Following this, children who had received preschool education were identified with the help of grade one class teachers. Children's parents were informed about the study and their consent was obtained as well. After this, 15-25 minute informal interviews were held with the children, based on the principle of volunteering. These interviews were audio recorded.

As a second data collection method, children were asked to draw pictures reflecting their views about their preschool and current elementary school experiences. Each child was given a drawing paper and asked to draw a picture reflecting their preschool experiences on one side of it and their current grade one experiences on the other side. They were then asked to describe their drawings and these descriptions were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

The data obtained were analyzed by using qualitative data analysis methods. Interviews with the children were first transcribed and read several times by each researcher to identify categories from the responses. Then the data were classified and analyzed in relation to the research questions.

At the same time, children's drawings were examined and emerging themes were noted. Following this, children's verbal descriptions of their drawings were transcribed and read several times by each researcher. Then, the drawings and children's verbal descriptions were compared to spot common points and differences.

Findings and Discussion

This section includes findings about children's perceptions of preschool and elementary school and their interpretations.

Positive Experiences in the Transition from Preschool to Elementary School

In the transition from preschool education to elementary school, children were found to be positively affected by activities and peer relationships. The sentences below represent these experiences:

"Activities at preschool and elementary school are similar. The drawing activities, too."

"We draw pictures and we have tiffin bags, we had these at preschool too."

"Just like we did in preschool, we have flags in this classroom, too. There's also Atatürk."

"The lockers at preschool and elementary school are similar, and the prints."

"Here too, we make pictures just like we used to do in preschool."

An important reason why children liked school was, in their own words, being "with their friends" (Phelps et al., 2014). Peers are an important and indispensable element of social environments, directly affect other children's development, and determine their perceptions about the environment.

"There are friends both at preschool and at elementary school."

"I'm happy that my preschool friends are here because we play games just like we did there."

"I had more friends at preschool because there were a lot of young children. And there were very few girls, most were boys. Kaan was there too, he was always up to something naughty."

“I have more friends here. I wouldn't like my preschool friends to come here because some of them were bad.”

Children who are loved and accepted by their peers feel more valuable and happy. Peers affect children's school perceptions, not only with positive communication approaches but also negative ones, such as bullying (Gülay, 2010). Therefore, good peer relationship management improves children's school perceptions.

As shown in the responses given above, the educational environment of preschools and peer play processes have positive effects on children's transition to grade one. When children are presented with similar experiences in elementary school, their adaptation is affected positively and they are able to fit in more easily.

“We used to play with toys at preschool. Here too, we sometimes play with play dough. Look at that reflection (pointing to the projected image on the board). They used the wall for reflections at preschool, here they use the board.”

Presenting children with high quality and rich preschool environments helps them discover themselves and their environments and actualize themselves (Güleş & Erişen, 2013). Allowing children to experience the processes of elementary school in advance at preschool affects children's readiness levels positively. Children's responses showed that their preschool experiences familiarized them with elementary school.

“Line drawing is similar, we used to do that at preschool too. Now we're also learning how to write letters.”

The transition from preschool to elementary school is made easier by teachers using educational approaches which satisfy children's developmental needs. Informing preschool teachers about the educational approaches and learning environments of elementary school may also help children's transition to elementary school (Yeboah, 2014).

Difficulties Faced by Children in their Transition from Preschool to Grade One

Children's responses to the questions about the difficulties they had in the transition from preschool to grade 1 revealed that preschool was more enjoyable and worth missing as it offered an environment involving play activities. On the other hand, negative comments about the elementary school included the higher ratio of homework and activities to be completed at a desk, higher responsibilities, less rich and less diverse activities, and lack of flexibility or free play time.

“In preschool we used to play games, there were a lot of toys. No toys in this classroom. At this school, there is only reading and writing.”

“Preschool is much more fun than elementary school because you get to play a lot of games, do fun things, draw pictures, play with play dough.”

“Preschool is more fun than elementary school because they make you write a lot in grade 1. Preschool doesn't tire you out.”

“We used to play nice games and draw pictures at preschool. We would play with toys and then tidy up the classroom and go home. The teacher gave us homework but only short ones. I used to love my teacher.”

Children's drawings also supported this point:

“These children are playing with toys, and these children are drawing pictures. And these are spring stuff (flow of seasons), he is playing with a toy car. And this is the teacher.” (Preschool drawing)

“There was a teacher, a ball, a carpet, a car.” (Elementary school drawing)

In Chan’s (2014) study, elementary school children said they loved and missed their preschool experiences and teachers. Chan’s (2014) participants also stated that some classes at elementary school were difficult and tedious; they liked the toys and materials in preschool classes more; and they faced sanctions more often at elementary school.

As can be understood from the children’s responses, the lack of toys and play opportunities at elementary schools present a difficulty for first graders who are still play children. In addition, children also made an emphasis on handwriting and homework. They stated that the reading and writing practice in grade 1 was long and tiring. It is obvious that children felt challenged by these activities. At the same time, there were statements showing that children thought school experiences in both stages of education were enjoyable.

“I think grade one is more fun than preschool because we write and read.”

“Grade one is more fun. Homework is fun. I love it.”

“Preschool was fun, and so is my classroom now. I love both.”

A positive attitude towards the transition process may be ensured by using interesting activities and developmentally appropriate methods.

Children's views about their preschool and elementary school teachers

Children’s views about their preschool and elementary school teachers showed that they liked both teachers and emphasized their teachers’ behavioral and physical characteristics in their responses:

“My preschool teacher had hair like my mother’s. It was the same color. My teacher was little (young). I also like our elementary school teacher. She’s gentle. She goes away and we sit in her chair.”

“Our preschool teacher treated us well. My elementary teacher gets us to read. She’s fine.”

“My preschool teacher used to let us play with toys everyday, and then we drew pictures. I used to want to start over again as soon as the activities ended. Our current teacher checks our homework, and she assigns more work when she is done.”

“My preschool teacher was a little overweight, her face was round. She got us to do fun things. My present teacher is also fun. She teaches us things, which is also fun.”

“My preschool teacher’s name was Fatma. She was very gentle. We could do whatever we wanted to. My current teacher sometimes gets us to do activities. She doesn’t require objects or materials like they did at preschool. She asked for a drawing book. We don’t take glue with us to school. We just take pencils. We sometimes draw pictures.”

Communication and empathy skills, which influence the way teachers approach children, also have a determining effect on children’s school perceptions. Teachers’ emphatic tendencies require them to understand children’s feelings and thoughts by putting themselves in their shoes in their interactions (Uğurlu, 2013).

Children's responses showed that elementary school teachers sometimes used rewards and punishments. Children defined their preschool teachers as more lenient and sharing:

“Our preschool teacher sometimes shouted at us. My elementary teacher shouts at everyone, but not me. She sends some children outside the classroom, but not everyone.”

“My preschool teacher’s name was Duygu, she never got angry with us, she let us do anything we wanted. My present teacher was also good at first, but now she is always angry with us.”

In the early childhood period, children are influenced by characteristic emotional facial gestures and other nonverbal elements of communication. These play a vital role in children’s definition of their emotions. Children can interpret other people’s and their own feelings easily through these, and they become greatly affected by the moods of people around them, particularly the people who are dear to them. The quality of children’s communication with these people in their immediate environment is vital in their socio-emotional development and self-perception (Çelik et al., 2002).

“My preschool teacher was very pretty, she never got angry with us, and she always painted her nails. I loved her. Our current teacher sometimes gets angry with us, but never with me because I’m well-behaved.”

“My preschool teacher used to do her hair differently. Our current teacher shouts at us when we make noise.”

Louizou (2011) reported in a study that children mentioned the following as they evaluated their elementary school and preschool teachers: “shouting at students, occasionally letting students bend the rules, giving students freedom, respecting students, establishing a positive relationship with students by treating them respectfully as adults”. The perceived teacher attitudes in the present study are parallel to Louizou (2011)’s results.

Teachers’ attitudes are highly related to school maturity and, consequently, school success in future school experiences (Spilt et al., 2010). Children need to feel secure and warm in the school environment. Teacher attitudes causing insecurity and condescension make children sense the relationship between themselves and teachers negatively, which may affect children’s school experiences and school perceptions adversely. Therefore, the attitudes and approaches of preschool and elementary school teachers are vital for children to develop a positive perception about the school process.

Children's Views about the Educational Environment at Preschool and Elementary School

Children's responses about the educational environment in their preschool and elementary school revealed that they found their preschool experiences more enjoyable owing to the higher number of play activities:

“I really would like to have preschool games and activities in elementary school too because they were so much fun.”

“Preschool was more enjoyable because there were games. I would love to have toys in elementary school too. I’d play with them during the break time.”

“I would love to have “toy days” like we used to have at preschool. Toys made it real fun.”

“Preschool was fun, and so is elementary school. But there are no toys at our school, no rubber house.”

“Is there play dough here? I would like that.”

Children can be given the best start possible when quality education is offered by qualified teachers in environments which are designed, constructed and organized in line with children’s development (Güleş and Erişen, 2013). Preschool programs should be suited to children’s developmental qualities and needs, allow for self actualization and discovery of the environment, be multifaceted and rich. High quality preschool education should present children with rich and diverse experiences; enable them to guide their own behaviors when faced with new environments and roles; develop socially accepted and healthy personal qualities and approaches; and cope with new situations. These may bring an emotionally stable, happier and readier transition to elementary school.

Children stated in their responses that their elementary school experiences were more rule-bound, based more on information and skills, and were more responsibility- and task-oriented than their preschool experiences:

“The activities here are different from the ones at preschool.”

“I can write now. I used to play at preschool, but here I have to study.”

“We don’t play those fun games we used to play at preschool anymore. We used to go out a lot at preschool, we do less of that here.”

Children’s drawings also corroborated these views:

“I’ve drawn myself, I’ve drawn my teacher. I ask my teacher if I can play. She says yes, that’s all.” (Preschool drawing)

“First the school entrance, the playroom, the classroom, learning room, and this space is for your shoes, the principal’s room, exit door, shoe cabinet, ball pool, slides, covered slides and outdoor slides.” (Preschool drawing)

“The teacher gets us to write. These are Şeyma, myself and Samet.” (Elementary school drawing)

“The National Anthem, the flag, a tree, the school, door to the principal’s room, door to the assistant principal’s room, doors to the classrooms, stairs, things from which we hear the National Anthem and break time signal (loudspeakers)” (Elementary school drawing)

Children’s responses showed that preschool was perceived as an enjoyable environment with rich materials and better interaction.

New elementary school experiences increase children’s motivation. Chan (2014) stated that preschool children who visited elementary school reported positive views about it and felt excited to start elementary school as it would mean they are now “older children”. At the same time, Chan (2014) also added that while children were impatient to start elementary school, they also worried about academic expectations and having enough competence.

Children whose development and school readiness are supported by preschool education do not have such worries owing to their self-confidence caused by their knowledge and skills, and they have higher motivation in the transition to elementary school.

“I love doing homework, writing and singing the National Anthem here.”

“I like learning how to read and write.”

“I love learning the letters of the alphabet.”

“I like buying things from the canteen and the stationery shop.”

“I like writing down numbers.”

Children's views showed that preschool environments which supported school readiness levels affected elementary school perceptions positively. Children's responses entailed positive attitudes towards preschool and elementary school, but also clearly revealed children's need to play in elementary school as well.

Children's Views about the Physical Environments of Their Preschool and Elementary School

As can be understood from the previous responses, children's views about the physical environment of the preschool and elementary school focused on the rich play materials and toys in the former. The elementary school materials they frequently emphasized were desks and the board. Children's drawings corroborated this finding:

“These are balloons, this is the stuff in which we leave our toys, this is the entrance to our school, and these are flower” (Preschool drawing)

“I drew our teacher's seat, desk, our desks, my friends, the door, and the board” (Elementary school drawing)

“On the teacher's desk a vase, the teacher's seat, the teacher, our desks, books, Muhammed sitting next to me, the stained glass window.” (Elementary school drawing)

Children stated that there were no toys at elementary school and they defined the word “joy” with play and toys. At the same time, there were no findings that elementary school environments included materials that would allow children to rest such as suitable floor covering, carpets, cushions. Children mentioned feeling fatigue at elementary school due to literacy practice and home assignments. Preschools have appropriate areas and materials for children to engage in restful activities. Aksoy and Baran (2010) studied children's school perceptions via their drawings and concluded that the children were highly sensitive to physically adequate preschool educational environments. The emphasis that the children in our study placed on materials is parallel to the findings of Aksoy and Baran (2010).

Phelps et al. (2014) studied the views of elementary school children in Vietnam about their school. They found that the children mentioned the following about their schools: Being with friends, having an understanding teacher, the school being an interesting place where new things can be learned, and having accessible materials. The authors also stated that children found school cleanliness, decoration, green spaces, equipment, and school-related responsibilities important. The overall findings of Phelps et al. (2014) were similar to the findings of the present study. In their responses about both school types, children mentioned teachers, peers, their attitudes and approaches, the physical characteristics of school, and the developmental appropriateness of the instructional process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The children who participated in this study had developed a positive attitude towards school experience and reported a huge difference between their preschool and elementary school experiences, despite the similarities. The children also had expectations about the social and physical environment of the school based on their interests and developmental needs. The school is among the most important environments in children's lives regarding both quality and the amount of time spent there. It is a place where children, who are adapting to social life and becoming socio-emotionally

independent, acquire vital experiences and shape their characters and lives. Children's responses showed that they were sensitive about the instructional process, teachers, peers and the physical environment. They were also observed to have developed an awareness of and a positive attitude towards the concepts of school, peers and teachers at preschool. At elementary school, on the other hand, their motivation was high but the transition from preschool to elementary school was not smooth. The children also stated that the educational environment, physical characteristics and teacher attitudes in their elementary school was rather different from those in their preschool.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations can be made:

For a smoother transition from preschool to elementary school, an effort may be made the characteristics of the two physical environments more similar. The adaptation to elementary school process may include more frequent play activities, and play-based learning experiences may be designed by considering children's physical and emotional development. The physical environment and materials may enable children to play and have more fun.



"Our teacher's seat, desk, Our seats, friends, the door and the board"



"These are windows and this is the door, these are my friends"



"My preschool teacher, she never gets angry, She let us do anything."



"On the teacher's desk a vase, the teacher's seat, our seats, books Muhammed sitting next to me, stained glass window"

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