

PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS ON READINESS OF CHILDREN ENTERING GRADE ONE

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INTRODUCTION

School entry is a significant milestone in a child's life, as well as in the life of his/her parents. According to Entwisle and Alexander (1998), the commencement of formal schooling is presented as a critical period in child development. During this critical period of transition, children's external worlds as well as the internal worlds undergo rapid changes. On the other hand, the high level of structure that characterizes school and classroom context demands more from children of their behavior, social and emotional competence, cognitive development, physical development and well-being and understanding and coping with school environment itself (Margetts, 2000b). Inability to create a balance between the two environments, namely home and school, would also lead to "tensions between change and stability and between adjusting to new challenges and preserving new patterns" (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2001: 505) thereby accelerating the development of mental health problems (Commonwealth Health and Aged Care, 2000). Further, misconceptions prevalent among key stakeholders regarding the growth and development of these children would lead to deficiencies in the quality of stimulation, support and nurture which may have long lasting effects in their lives. Therefore, assisting children to manage this potentially challenging transition period and make a positive start to school can help in maintaining and fostering a positive sense of help (Entwisle and Alexander, 1998) and thereby supporting their well-being. Preschool teachers and primary teachers have a major role to play in this regard. As such, a comprehensive study has been carried out by the Ministry of Education to develop a systematic process to assess school readiness of children entering grade one. The present paper analyses the perceptions of parents, pre-school teachers and primary teachers on school readiness of children entering grade one and the possible implications of their perceptions on the development and learning of those children.

METHODOLOGY

In line with the survey research design, the sample of the study included 125 children (S=71, T= 54) who entered grade one classes and their parents (120), 74 (S=44, T=30) grade one teachers, and 20 pre-school teachers. Grade one teachers had been conducting the "identification of the child programme" with newly entered children by the time that this study was carried out. Application of multi-methods such as observations on the performance of grade one children, focus group discussions with the parents and pre-school teachers and a questionnaire for grade one teachers permitted integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods for analyzing data in this study.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The observation schedule used for collecting data on school readiness of children entering grade one was prepared by amalgamating the competencies listed by the National Institute of Education in their manual on 'Identification of the child' and some items were selected from school readiness tests identified through the literature review. Data were recorded using a five point scale ranged from 'excellent' (5) to 'need more support' (1). The analysis (Table 1) revealed that at the school entry, the competencies (6) related to social and emotional development obtained the highest mean value (3.76) in comparison to other four groups of competencies in the selected group of children. Within the group, "willingly participate in singing and dancing" was received the highest mean value (3.98) and the lowest mean value was obtained by "be able to wait to get ones turn". The competencies (5) related to language development had shown the lowest mean value (3.45) and the competencies titled as "be able to engage in work attentively" and "be able to listen, understand and act accordingly" in this category received the lowest mean values (3.34 and 3.39 respectively) out of all 35 competencies which would provide the foundation for their cognitive development. The competencies related to physical health and well-being, cognitive development and approaches to learning were shown modest mean values (3.68, 3.68, and 3.65). It could be further noted that all the competencies of children entering grade one were above the average though only a few children had reached the satisfactory level (4.00) or exceptional level (5.00) at school entry.

Table 1: School readiness of children entering grade one

Category	Overall mean
Physical health and well-being (10 competencies)	3.68
Social and emotional development (10 competencies)	3.76
Approaches to learning (5 competencies)	3.68
Language development (6 competencies)	3.45
Cognitive development (4 competencies)	3.65

Having analyzed the data obtained through focus group discussions, it could be revealed that there was a noticeable difference between pre-school teachers who run their own pre-schools (14 in the sample but 60% in the whole country according to a MoE report, 2013 and who are being employed by an organization (Divisional Offices or religious organizations: 6) in their perceptions on children entering grade one. The first category preferred teaching to student activities and emphasized competencies related to reading, writing, numbers and English as the main competencies to be acquired by children entering grade one. They justified their opinion by highlighting reasons such as parents' pressure, sustainability of their preschool, competition with other pre-schools and demands of grade one teachers. It was shocking to find that some had been conducting tests to assess the performance of preschoolers which is not even encouraged till grade three in the school system. Some claimed that the flourishing start they had provided in their pre-schools led children to achieve success in grade 5 scholarship examination. It was surprising to find that a reasonable number of pre-school teachers did not have a clear idea about the expectations of schools on children entering grade one. The majority of pre-school teachers in the second category were knowledgeable about the grade one syllabus and they knew to link competencies related to pre-reading and pre-writing, gross and fine motor development and social development to 'school readiness'.

The majority of parents tend to focus on reading, writing, numerical skills and the competency in English as essential skills that should be acquired by their children at school entry. They want their children to be more competitive, outstanding, obedient and less troublesome in classroom activities. It was surprising to find that some parents preferred indoor activities; desk work and individual tasks where as the recommended strategies linked

with outdoor activities, play and group tasks that facilitate the holistic development of children. For them, pre-school is another formal setup that can provide a strong backing for their children's education. However, such attitude would further limit the joy and happiness of their children only to first two-to-three years of their life.

Grade one teachers emphasized the importance of obtaining pre-school education and our observations also confirmed that about 95% of children in the relevant age group are going to a pre-school. Table 2 (No such children =37.8%) also confirms this trend which should be considered as a very positive development in our education system. Further, as illustrated in Table 2, grade one teachers find those children as very active (31.1%), more skillful (24.3%) and more experienced (12.2%). On the contrary, they reported that non-preschoolers were average (13.5%), less socialized (12.2%) and very difficult to detach from their parents (9.4%), when compared with those who attended a pre-school. Only 9.4% of teachers felt that there were no outstanding differences between the two categories of children.

Table 2: Prominent characteristics of preschoolers and non-preschoolers

Preschoolers	f	%	Non preschoolers	f	%
Very active	23	31.1	Average in every aspect	10	13.5
More skillful	18	24.3	Less socialized/afraid of others	09	12.2
More experienced	09	12.2	No difference	07	9.4
Develop friendly relationship	07	9.4	Difficult to detach them from parents	07	9.4
Very enthusiastic	05	6.7	Not very forward	05	6.7
Forward and look for challenges	05	6.7	Expect teacher's help	04	5.4
Adjust well	03	4.1	No such children in grade one	28	37.8
No response	04	5.4	No response	04	5.4
Total	74	100	Total	74	100

When inquired about the problems they face with newly entered grade one children, they had given prominence to the following:

- The majority of children entering grade one do not possess basic life skills such as toileting and eating alone; fine motor skills such as holding and using pastels, pencils and scissors in the correct manner; working attentively for some time and completing a task till the end; social skills such as work in groups, caring for others, sharing with others, listening to others etc.
- Attempts made by inexperienced and untrained teachers to teach reading, writing and numerical skills for preschoolers have almost doubled their work. Supporting children to unlearn wrong skills is more difficult than supporting them to learn correct skills.
- Children in grade one feel annoyed and frustrated by repeating the same lessons they have learned at pre-schools (as they pointed out, grade one and even grade two syllabuses are taught at pre-schools) which might lead to develop troublesome behavior during early stages in their lives.
- Even though the procedures such as loading children with homework and conducting formal tests in some pre-schools would increase parents' attraction, they might obstruct the natural development of children.

The above situation clearly indicates that there is a mismatch between the expectations of pre-schools and primary schools about the competencies to be acquired by the children at school entry. Therefore, there is a need for developing a suitable mechanism to assess competencies of children at school entry and a feedback process to make all stakeholders accountable for the development of children.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, there is a positive move towards pre-school education in the country though it is imperative that the activities of the pre-schools should be streamlined towards the right direction. At school entry, the majority of children show a moderate performance in the required competencies which need to be further improved. However, misconceptions and contradictions among different stakeholders have led to a big controversy which has affected adversely on the holistic development of children passing through the early childhood years. Thus, all stakeholders should work collaboratively to provide a more conducive and favorable environment for our children in order to provide a positive start for their life at school.. Parents and pre-school teachers should focus more on the development of basic life skills of children in order to make them ready for the school. Finally, this study stresses the need for having a mechanism to assess competencies of children entering grade one which will provide an insight for grade one teachers as well as pre-school teachers to design and implement the teaching-learning processes to suit the characteristics of children.

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