DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 248 PS 026 712

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TITLE Getting Ready for School.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education (Brisbane, Australia, 1997). Similar in content to PS 026 713, another conference paper by the same authors.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; Learning Readiness; *Parent Attitudes; *School Readiness; Student Adjustment; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Sydney)

ABSTRACT

In recent years, there have been calls in many countries to ensure that children come to school "ready to learn." This paper is the first in a series that explored what is meant by this term by different groups of people and the ways in which the beliefs underpinning such a term influence decisions such as when children start school, the classes they enter, and whether or not they progress annually. In this initial investigation, groups of parents, school teachers, and children associated with two schools in suburban Sydney, Australia were asked to identify elements of school readiness and the ways in which they could be identified. Results showed that parents and teachers were united in their focus on adjustment and disposition as the major elements of readiness, although particularly with adjustment, different features were identified. Teachers and parents emphasized the importance of children separating comfortably from parents, while teachers alone added that children's abilities to concentrate, sit for periods of time, and use initiative were important. Children's responses, unlike those of the adults, focused on rules, indicating that children have firm views about what it means to be ready to go to school and that these views differ considerably from those who make the decisions about readiness. (Contains 29 references.) (EV)

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
ANNUAL CONFERENCE
BRISBANE, 1997

Getting ready for school[1]

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Abstract

In recent years, there have been calls, both within Australia and abroad, to ensure that children come to school 'ready to learn'. This paper is the first in a series which will explore what is meant by this term by different groups of people and the ways in which the beliefs underpinning such a term influence decisions such as when children start school, the classes they enter and whether or not they progress annually.

In this initial investigation, groups of parents, school teachers and children associated with two schools in suburban Sydney were asked to identify elements of school readiness and the ways in which they could be identified. This paper will consider differences and similarities in the responses of these groups and note implications for the development of transition programs into compulsory schooling.

Introduction

This paper reports on a pilot project designed to investigate the perceptions, interpretations and notions of the term 'school readiness' held by the groups of people most involved in the transition of children from settings prior to compulsory schooling to that compulsory schooling. It follows the tradition of collecting data about school readiness from teachers and parents (Margetts, 1996) but differs from these studies by collecting data from those most affected by the transition – the children.

The term 'school readiness' is used by all the adult stakeholders in the transition of children into compulsory schooling. However, there is sufficient evidence (Griffin & Harvey, 1995; Kagan, 1992; May & Kundert, 1997; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996) to suggest that the term is used by different groups of people to mean different things. This pilot project is the initial step in trying to reconcile these differences and to establish some consensus about what it means for children to be ready for school.

After reporting the findings of the pilot project, this paper outlines an ambitious research program for the next few years which will constitute a comprehensive study of the notion of school readiness. As such, the research has the potential to inform the future development of transition to school programs.

[1] The support for the continuation of this project through the University of Western Sydney Macarthur Complementary Research Units Program is gratefully acknowledged.

Background

On several occasions within the last decade, the rhetoric of school readiness has been used in calls for children to come to school "ready to learn" (for example, Carrick, 1989, Rice, 1997). This view is echoed in the first national goal for education in the United States of America that "by the year 2000 every child in America should start school ready to learn" (Boyer, 1991, p. 5). While the goal of having children start school ready to learn is praiseworthy, this statement has proved problematic as a guide to policy implementation. As one example, Kagan (1993) suggests that 'school readiness' and 'readiness to learn' may be seen as quite different, if complementary, notions, with readiness for learning relating to the developmental level at which the learning of specific material is regarded appropriate, and readiness for school focussed on specific skills children may be required to possess at a given time. Viewed in this way, Kagan posits that *"readiness for learning is a gate-opener; readiness for school is a gatekeeper"* (1993, p. 67).

To add to the confusion, there are still more definitions and approaches to school readiness. The maturational view of readiness, based on Gessell's theory of development (Gesell, Ilg & Ames, 1968), describes development in terms of predictable stages guided by children's internal maturation. From this theoretical perspective it is assumed that environmental factors have little impact on development and that, because the developmental stages are predictable and universal, they can be assessed (Graue & Shepard, 1989). The first of these assumptions leads to the conclusion that the perceived failure of children in a given context is a function of inappropriate demands made on children who are not yet ready. The second assumption provides the basis for the development of tests of readiness which are, in reality, tests of development.

In contrast, Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky 1978, 1982) contends that learning precedes development. Children, as 'ever ready learners', grow into the intellectual life around them and are stimulated by it. So, in marked contrast to prevailing maturationist notions that advocate keeping children out of school until they are deemed ready, Vygotskian theorists advocate placing children in rich learning situations as a means of hastening development (Kagan, 1992).

One result of the debate about what constitutes readiness for school has been to consider, or in the case of Australia to re-consider, the issue of school entry age. In the US, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1990) has cited age as the only equitable criterion for school entry. Kagan (1993) suggests that this may be one way to bypass the inequitous situations whereby a child may be deemed ready to enter school X, but not school Y, because they use different criteria to assess readiness. However, she cautions against the assumption that children of the same age will form a homogeneous group.

While each state in Australia uses age as the criterion for school entry, there is no common age of entry across Australia (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996). Recently, there have been calls for a common school entry

age across the country (Schools Council, 1992; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996). These calls seem to have little to do with the assumption that age of school entry equates with readiness, but a great deal to do with the ease of transition from state to state and the comparability of provision for young children, as indicated by the following recommendation of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee:

> *The Committee recommends that the governments of the Commonwealth, States and Territories devise consistent nomenclature and descriptors for the years of early childhood and of compulsory schooling. This will entail: ... a common starting age for, and a common date of eligibility for entry to, compulsory schooling, and similarly for the year before compulsory schooling* ... (1996, p. 40)

The challenges involved have resulted in many different definitions of school readiness. Some are based on assessments of development (such as the Gessell School Readiness Test, Ilg, Ames, Haines & Gillespie, 1978) and others have incorporated a range of skills. For example, Blackman (1988) and Davidowitz (1988) have conceived the construct of school readiness as mainly embodying academic and motor skills. More recently, however, school readiness has been operationalised as a multidimensional concept in which the child's cognitive, social, physical and emotional development is considered (Immroth & Ash-Geisler, 1994; Peters & McLeod, 1997; Quay, Kaufman-McMurrain, Minore & Steele, 1997). The definition employed by the US group formed to consider implementation of the national goal of readiness also utilises a multidimensional framework which encompasses physical well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, individual approaches toward learning, language use, cognition and general knowledge (Kagan, 1993).

Given the diversity in definitions of readiness, it is not surprising that groups of people believe that different elements are important. Responses from parents and teachers reported by Lewitt and Baker (1995) revealed both agreements and differences in what each constitutes as important elements for a child's school readiness. The majority of teachers (more than 75%) indicated that being physically healthy, rested and well nourished was essential, while parents were much more likely than teachers to report that academic skills were important for school readiness. Both groups reported that communication skills, enthusiasm and social skills such as being able to take turns were important. In another study of teachers from school and non-school early childhood settings, Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz & Rosenkoetter (1989) reported that the major determinants of school readiness for both groups were social interaction, communication, instruction following, conduct and self-care. Davies & North (1990) found that the most frequently mentioned determinants of school readiness for their sample of Kindergarten teachers were self-help, social, communication and cognitive skills, in that order. It seems that definitions of readiness depend upon the perspectives of those using the term (Griffin & Harvey, 1995; Kagan, 1992, 1993; May & Kundert, 1997).

Lewit & Baker (1995) attempt to define school readiness as the notion of readiness for learning to a standard of physical, intellectual and social development that enables children to fulfil school requirements and to assimilate a schools curriculum. There is little agreement as to what the standard should be. As a result, there is a lack of reliable and accepted tools for measuring the school readiness of individual children, and the meaning of the available data is often debated. This situation is well summarised by Kagan (1993) when she says *"you can't measure what you can't define"* (p. 70).

The study reported in this paper recognises the considerable differences among the major adult stakeholders about the meaning of school readiness. It seeks to explore these differences and to incorporate into this discussion a consideration of the views of some of the children who are the objects of this confusion. In doing so, this study utilises a grounded theory approach which does not rely on pre-determined categories of responses from participants, unlike most of the reported research (for example, Immroth & Ash-Geisler, 1994; Quay et al, 1997). Hence, in two major ways–the involvement of children and the use of open-ended responses gathered through related grounded theory approaches–this study represents a departure from past studies.

Pilot study

The research questions underpinning this pilot project were the following.

1. What do different groups of people - children, parents / guardians, school teachers and school executive - understand by the term 'school readiness'?
2. What criteria are used by these different groups of people to determine when children are 'ready for school'?
3. Whose responsibility does each of these different groups of people feel it is to get children 'ready for school'?
4. What does each of these different groups of people feel should happen to get children 'ready for school'?
5. What does each of these different groups of people regard as the elements of successful transitions to school?
6. What criteria are used by each of these different groups of people to measure the success of transitions to school?
7. What does each of these different groups of people expect to happen when children start school?
8. What expectations does each of these different groups have of the other groups when children start school?

The researchers have developed a very strong collaborative relationship with two schools in the south western suburbs of Sydney. Through these schools, arrangements were made to conduct focus group interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) with groups of parents/guardians, school teachers, including school executive, school children and children who had not yet commenced school. The numbers in the sample are shown in Table 1.

Group	Number	
	Male	Female
School children	13	10
Children not yet at school	2	1
Parents / Guardians	3	11
School teachers, including executive	0	14

Table 1 Sample for pilot project interviews

Each of the focus group interviews was conducted by one of the researchers with another processing notes. Adult groups consisted of between three and five people, and child groups consisted of two to three children. With the permission of the participants, the interviews also were recorded on audio tape. Interviews lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes for each of the adult groups and 10 to 15 minutes for the children. The same questions were asked of each group, with suitable modifications for the groups of children. All participants were encouraged to explore issues of relevance to them.

While the focus group interviews covered all of the research questions, the analysis of results presented in this paper considers only the first two of these–the understanding among the different groups of the term school readiness and the criteria used to determine this.

Results

Data from the focus group interviews which was pertinent to the first of the research questions were analysed to determine possible categories of comment. Five major categories arose from this analysis which, after some discussion among the researchers, were labelled: knowledge, adjustment, skill, disposition and rules.

Knowledge: Responses were coded as *knowledge* if they made reference to ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known in order to enter school. Such comments included reference to children being able to count, recognise letters and words and read their name. Typically, these comments were made in the context of children getting a start on 'school learning'.

Adjustment: Responses were coded as *adjustment* if they encompassed notions of social adjustment to the school context. Typical of this category were comments about children being able to feel comfortable in their separation from their parent/guardian, being able to get on with large groups of children and being confident in their interactions with adults and peers.

Skill: Responses were coded as *skill* oriented if they referred to small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour (Katz & Chard, 1989). Typically, skills that demonstrated a level of independent action were mentioned, such as children being able to tie their shoelaces, toilet and dress themselves.

Disposition: Responses were allocated to the category of *disposition* if they incorporated comments about children's attitudes to school or to learning. Comments about children being happy, enthusiastic, bored or interested in school or learning were included in this category.

Rules: Responses were coded as *rules* when they related to fitting in with the school and school expectations. Comments about children knowing and being able to conform with the regulations of the school such as 'sitting up straight', 'having to wear a hat', 'listening to the teacher' and 'knowing what the bells are for' were included in this category, as were comments about knowing the reward and punishment systems operating in the school.

Other: A further category of *other* has been used to include comments not able to be placed in any of the five defined categories. There were very few comments in this category (less than 8% of all comments) and they fell under three main subcategories - physical development (4 comments), age (2) and order of birth (2).

Analysis of the frequency of comments from each of the three groups of participants–children, parents and teachers–in each of the categories is presented in Table 2.

	Knowledge	Adjustment	Skill	Disposition	Rules	Other	Total
Children	3 (10%)	0	2 (7%)	0	22 (76%)	2 (7%)	29
Parents	3 (14%)	8 (36%)	3 (14%)	5 (23%)	1 (5%)	2 (9%)	22
Teachers	3 (6%)	24 (44%)	9 (17%)	14 (26%)	0	4 (7%)	54
Total	9	32	14	19	23	8	105

Table 2 Frequencies (Percentages of Group) of Comments in Each Category

While these categories have been derived using a grounded theory approach to the data, it is interesting to note that they bear some resemblance, but are not identical, to the four categories of learning goals enunciated by Katz & Chard (1989, pp. 20-42) and the categories of other researchers discussed above (Davies & North, 1990; Hains et al, 1989; Lewit, 1997). The similarities give the researchers sufficient confidence to continue with the analysis using their categories. However, the differences highlight the influence of pre-determined categories and items on the responses of parents and teachers.

Children

Several patterns are noted from the analysis. The first is that the children already at school overwhelmingly focussed on the awareness of rules as essential in being ready for school. Several children mentioned the importance of "bringing your best manners", and the importance of listening to the teacher and to the school rules. Some comments indicated familiarity with the reward systems of the school, with one child noting that if you "sit up straight you get a merit award" and another that "hang up your bag and sit

down, you'll get a sticker". Others mentioned specific rules such as "Don't say rude words", "You have to wear your hat", "No running on the asphalt" and "Don't run, put rubbish in the bin". There were some mentions of knowledge "spelling some easy words like 'a' and 'at', know the alphabet" and skills "tie shoe laces up so you don't trip", "you have to know how to go to the toilet before you start school", but these were few (17% combined) when compared with the focus on rules (76%). Responses allocated to the *other* category consisted on references to age (1) "you have to be five" and physical size (1) "if you're little, you get scared and forget everything".

One of the children who was to start school at the beginning of the next school year also mentioned rules as important, noting that you "have to be good or you'll get a yellow card and ... if you are naughty go into the corner". Another preschool child said that to get ready for school you had to "write your name", while the third member of the group was quite concerned that getting ready for school meant "you get a needle before school and it can hurt".

Parents

Parental responses were spread across the categories, with most responses coded as adjustment (36%), followed by disposition (23%), knowledge (14%), skills (14%). Only one parent made reference to children needing to know the rules of school. Single comments relating to physical attributes and to birth order also were recorded.

Responses emphasising adjustment included reference to the need for children to be "able to associate and mingle, play and socialise well with other kids", "able to be without Mum, be away for that length of time, take instructions from another adult" and "they have to be independent, comfortable to be without Mum". Children were described as having the necessary disposition towards school or learning when they "want to learn", "are eager to participate in games" or when they "said 'I want to learn to read and write'". Knowing how to read their name and write was an indication of school readiness for some parents, with others mentioning the importance of "a basic knowledge of the alphabet and numbering". The skills of toileting independently, tying shoelaces and dressing independently were noted.

Overall, parents seemed to have a broad perspective on school readiness. While the major focus was on issues related to social adjustment, these issues were not considered to the exclusion of others. Parents were eager to see their children well settled in the school environment and a sense that the children were happy was a prime concern for parents. While specific knowledge was mentioned, it was regarded as a 'bonus' for the children, rather than as essential: "If they can read their name and write, the teachers like it", "they learn at school, they don't need to know that [writing name] before they go".

Teachers

Like parents, teachers reported several dimensions to school readiness. Adjustment was emphasised in 44% of responses, with disposition (26%) and skills (17%) also being mentioned frequently. The least mentioned was knowledge, with only 6% of

responses being coded in this category. Comments relating to physical size (2), age (1) and birth order (1) made up the responses allocated to the *other* category.

Teachers were firm in their focus on adjustment, with comments such as "social skills are the most important. I am not concerned if they are aware of the alphabet or numbers ... I am more concerned about their interactions with others ...", "interactions with adults and kids [are most important], they need to be past the tantrums", and "[when they are ready] they have the ability to separate from their parents, they understand that their parent goes home, they are socially capable of being separated from their parents".

A further type of adjustment was mentioned by teachers: "being able to concentrate, sit down on the floor and listen", "follow directions", "do as other adults ask", "can follow basic instructions", "they need to be able to sit for 10 to 15 minutes" and "they need to be able to concentrate, be settled and have their own initiative". The ability to operate in a school environment was an element unique to teachers' perceptions of school readiness. This suggests that an important part of school readiness for teachers is the ability of children to "fit in" to the classroom culture and to display skills and abilities that enable a classroom to function effectively.

Dispositions were mentioned by many teachers, and children were described as ready for school when they "recognise learning and want to be involved", "want to explore", "are motivated", and "are interested in reading".

Most of the skills mentioned by teachers were similar to those referred to by parents: "independence with toileting"; "can dress and feed themselves"; and "toilet, tie shoe laces, unwrap lunch and eat". Additional skills mentioned were "have to be able to hold a pencil" and "can look after and identify their belongings". There were few references to knowledge, however when these did occur, they related to recognising or writing names and being familiar with books.

Discussion

As in previous studies, several different elements have been identified that, when combined, contribute to a sense of school readiness. Parents and teachers were united in their focus on adjustment and disposition as the major elements of readiness, although particularly with adjustment, different features were identified. Teachers and parents emphasised the importance of children separating comfortably from parents, while teachers alone added that children's abilities to concentrate, sit for periods of time and use initiative were important. These last aspects relate to classroom management issues and indicate that for teachers, being ready for school involves the ability to be a part of a large group competing for the attention of the one adult. Not surprisingly, teachers report that the children who are ready for school are those who do not demand constant attention or take them away from the group focus of their classroom.

The only category of responses not mentioned by teachers and mentioned only once by parents, was that of rules. This was the category mentioned overwhelmingly by

children. Children's responses are important in at least two ways. Firstly, they indicate that children have firm views about what it means to be ready to go to school and secondly, these views differ considerably from those who make the decisions about readiness–their parents / guardians and teachers. It is remarkable that children have not been asked about issues that are of direct relevance to them, even when programs have been specifically designed to meet their needs, alleviate their fears and help make the transition to school a smooth one. In this sense, the positioning of children reiterates the post-structuralist criticism that what is good for families is often equated with what is good for children, or in this sense what is good for teachers is good for children (Mason & Steadman, 1997). Rayner (1991) is strident in her criticism of the power of children, describing them as

> *a large uninfluential section of the community. They do not have access to the means of exerting power, or protecting their own vulnerability. They are restricted in the extent to which they can make decisions about their own lives. They do not play any part in the processes which determine the policies which affect them. (p. 36)*

It would seem that this is the case in the context of school readiness.

Despite the great concerns about the school entry age, as expressed by peak groups and politicians (Schools Council, 1992; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996), there was little reference to age as a decisive factor in school readiness. Reference to age came from one child who said that children could not start school until they were five. Other statements about age from teachers suggested that children should be at least five when they start school, but there was acknowledgment from the same teacher that readiness could not be defined by age. Another teacher mentioned age, but more as a negative influence on considerations of when children were ready for school, noting that "kids come to school because they have a birthday. The majority just arrive and parents assume they will learn".

The blurring of the distinction between readiness to learn and readiness for school (Kagan, 1993) was evident in several of the responses. In their reference to dispositions, teachers listed interest in reading, children's motivation to learn and their eagerness to explore. The first of these responses relates more to the concept of readiness for learning, indicating an appropriate time to introduce a particular content focus for learning. Implicit in this response is the idea that learning to read occurs at school.

The concept of school readiness described by Kagan (1993) fits more closely with those examples of adjustment listed by teachers. The ability to follow directions and concentrate on school tasks relate to children being ready to "do school", that is, to "fit in" to the school culture, rather than their ability to construct particular forms of knowledge.

None of the responses to questions about defining readiness for school implied an acceptance of either the maturational or Vygotskian perspectives of readiness. However,

in discussions of grade retention and related issues both perspectives were mentioned, albeit by only a few parents and teachers. One parent described her desire to have her child repeat Kindergarten to allow him more time to get ready for "the onslaught in year 1", a sentiment reflective of the maturational notion that "the gift of time" (Gessell Institute, 1982) would address issues of readiness. An alternative perspective reflecting the Vygotskian position that learning occurs at a level slightly beyond the child's independent capabilities, was offered by one of the children who said "you don't have to be fantastic at reading. You don't have to know everything, so they don't need to feel embarrassed, their teacher will teach them".

Underlying the responses from children, parents and teachers was the assumption that what happens in school relates to learning and that children go to school to learn. While this would seem to be a reasonable assumption, and certainly one that reflects societal beliefs, it also begs the question of what happens before school. The connections between what happens in the home life of children, in preschool or child care and school readiness will be the focus of further investigations, as outlined below.

Future directions

As mentioned previously, the pilot project reported in this paper is regarded as the beginning of an extensive research agenda investigating issues related to school readiness. One of the aims of the pilot project was to collect data from the key stakeholders in school readiness in order to inform the development of a questionnaire which will be distributed initially throughout NSW. Focus group interviews are planned as a follow-up to the questionnaire, as a means of enriching the data collected from parents and teachers and in order to collect data from children who are at school as well as those who have not yet started school. We are confident that the inclusion of children's voices and the use of grounded theory, rather than predetermined lists of readiness attributes, will contribute significantly to the large body of literature and the development of practice in the area of school readiness.

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