



School Readiness and School Entry-Age: Views and Experiences of Turkish Teachers and Families on a New Educational Policy *

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Abstract

This study examined the views of Turkish teachers and families on children's school readiness and their experiences with a new educational policy on school-entry age. This study took place in Ankara, Turkey, with 268 teachers and 400 family members as participants. A qualitative, interpretative research design was used in this study, with open-ended surveys and semi-structured interviews as the major data-gathering techniques. The grounded theory was applied in data analysis. The results highlighted the perspectives of teachers and families, who experienced first-hand the implications of the school entry age, along with their worries and concerns about their children's experiences. Child and family characteristics, parenting style, peer interaction, children's prior educational experiences, and media/technology were considered as influential factors in school readiness. Problems associated with children's skills, schools, curriculum, and teachers were reported. The actions taken by the schools and policy makers highlight the importance of successful development and implementation of educational policy decisions. The results of this study might promote collaborative dialogues among educational policymakers, educational organizations and institutions, schools, teachers, families, and communities at large in order to foster shared responsibility, translate the policy more effectively into practice, and generate feedback for future policy development.

Keywords

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Introduction

At what age children should begin first grade? Identifying a school entry-age for children is complicated as children do not all develop at the same pace (Stipek, 2002). Educational policy makers in Turkey change educational systems frequently ignoring the developmental needs of children—one of the main factors that should drive the changes in education of young children. Similar to many countries around the world, school-entry age and children's readiness for school have become an important political and social issue in Turkey. Access to education and entry to schools have been one of the main policy goals, among others (teacher recruitment, curriculum development, organization of

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instruction, school and personnel management, development and allocation of resources for education, etc.), of the Turkish government. In 2012, the Turkish Parliament, with the recommendation of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), instituted several changes to its national educational system.¹ The most recent change was the compulsory education bill, which extended compulsory education from 8 to 12 years. This bill also brought other changes to education in Turkey, such as lowering the minimum age for entering school from 6 to 5 years and redefining the 12 years of compulsory education into 3 levels—primary, middle, and high school—of 4 years each. These changes implied funding, additional personnel (with the initiation of this policy change, there appeared to be an excess of some 50 thousand teachers in primary schools), and restructuring of schools to provide separate primary and lower secondary institutions, curricular reforms, and professional development for teachers so they could adapt to the changes. In order to put these changes into effect, the MoNE also made some adjustments in the system. For instance, to increase funding, the government provided incentives for private contributions to the educational system. Moreover, the MoNE revised the curricula for kindergarten and first grade, partly restructured the physical environments of elementary schools, offered a few professional development activities for first-grade teachers, recruited new teachers, and permitted teachers to change their areas of teaching (on condition that they minor in the field to which they prefer to be transferred) based on the number of teachers needed for a smooth transition.

Among the changes made in the Turkish educational system, the most debated issue is the school-entry age. Families are obliged to register their children in the first grade when the latter turn 66 months (5.5 years) old in September of every academic year. Children aged between 60 and 66 months, whose school readiness is observed as sufficient by educators, will be admitted at the start of the academic year upon their parents' request. This later was increased to 69 months, depending upon the parental consent. The previous minimum school-entry age was 6 years when there was no parental consent to send a child to school earlier. Children ages between 48 and 60 months will be admitted to kindergarten, which is not part of compulsory education. Many families have been questioning their children's readiness for primary school when the latter have just reached their 66th month. The responsibility for registration of children in first grade is given to parents and public officials, from governors to school principals, to ensure that all children from the age of 66 months within their jurisdiction continue attending school, at least until the end of the 12-year compulsory period. However, are the measures taken by the Turkish government and the MoNE adequate for a large-scale system change that affects thousands of students, families, and teachers? The media regularly broadcasts concerns of parents/families and educators regarding the new legislation; they are the people who know the children best. Parents and teachers fear that children start school unprepared for the tasks awaiting them (National Education Goals Panel [NEGP], 1998).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013), the new policy of compulsory education for 12 years, with a starting age of 5.5 years, can improve student transitions between educational levels, but if not managed well, it can lead to more segregation among schools and further inequalities. In addition to the OECD's concerns, because the MoNE has not piloted the changes in school-entry age and compulsory education, these revisions were put at risk of failure. Moreover, such a top-down approach to the implementation of this new educational policy will most likely influence the practice in schools in unintended, less than optimal ways. With these risks in mind and the fact that national policy is understood, interpreted, and implemented in local settings in a diverse range of approaches (Nixon, Gregson, Spedding, & Mearns, 2008), one year after the new program's launch, the researchers examined the views of teachers and families on children's school readiness and their experiences with the implementation of the new educational policy.

¹ The MoNE in Turkey is responsible for all types—formal, informal, and nonformal—of educational services and makes all the decisions regarding the educational system, including but not limited to access to schools.

School Readiness

It is agreed that a child's future academic success is dependent on readiness to learn (Ramey, Ramey, & Lanzi, 2004); however, the exact definition of school readiness varies in the literature. The meaning of children's school readiness has been subjected to various interpretations by scholars, educators, families, and policymakers (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000). In fact, there are approximately 150 definitions of school readiness (Britto, 2012). Despite the fact that school readiness has not been clearly defined, it influences many decisions about children (Kagan, 1990).

Generally, school readiness refers to the age at which developmental skills mature to the point where children are ready to benefit from formal schooling (Morrison & Hindman, 2008). Despite a number of empirical research studies investigating children's readiness for school and the association of age and learning (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Crawford, Dearden, & Meghir, 2007; Crone & Whitehurst, 1999; Datar, 2006; Duncan et al., 2007; Lincove & Painter, 2006; McEwan & Shapiro, 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2007; Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009; Yeşil Dağlı & Jones, 2012), the issue remains a source of much debate. Furthermore, many countries have different policies and practices on school readiness and school-entry age. Past research is also inconclusive as to the association of age with children's readiness for school and the overall effect of age on school entry (Lincove & Painter, 2006).

The definition of children's school readiness has changed considerably—from a primarily maturational context to a more socially constructed concept (Britto, 2012)—over the last couple of decades. According to Britto, school readiness is “a product of the interaction between the child and the range of environmental and cultural experiences that maximize the development outcomes for children (p. 6).” There are four theoretical conceptualizations of school readiness in the education and child development literature—*nativist*, *empiricist/environmentalist*, *social constructivist*, and *interactionist*. Nativists believe that children are ready for school when they mature to a certain level that enables them to focus on work, socially engage with their peers, and accept direction from adults, and nativists assert that environment plays only a minor role in this endogenously determined process. Empiricists/environmentalists characterize school readiness as the mastery of a set of knowledge and skills. On the other hand, social constructivists consider school readiness in social and cultural terms, arguing that it is a set of ideas or meanings constructed by schools, families, and communities; it is a multidimensional construct that is not only dependent on children's individual characteristics. Interactionists focus on the ongoing interaction between children (their inherent characteristics) and the environmental and cultural context (conditions in which children are reared and taught) (Meisels, 1999).

Ongoing research suggests that children's readiness for school is multifaceted; it encompasses a range of developmental skills—physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive—that children need to thrive (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Moreover, whether or not a child is ready for school always depends on the demands that the school places on the child and the support it provides, as well as the child's knowledge and skills (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). It is widely accepted that children's development is irregular and episodic (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). Even if children meet a specific age criteria for entering school, they vary greatly with regard to their developmental characteristics.

The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1998) in the USA recognizes that enabling all children to start school “ready to learn” is not only dependent on children's developmental characteristics; it is a shared responsibility of all adults in the lives of children and institutions in the community. According to the NEGP, strengthening children's achievement requires not only getting children ready for school, but also preparing schools for the particular children they serve. Dockett and Dockett (2008) assert that it is not only the children who need to be ready for school, policymakers,

legislators, schools, families, and communities also have responsibilities for being prepared for children and ensuring their successful transition to school. Planning effectively for children with varying developmental, individual, and cultural backgrounds can be daunting for schools. To understand and respond better to such diverse backgrounds, schools need to become familiar with what it means to be ready, so they can assess and implement strategies to ensure success for all students (Dowker, Schweinhart, & Daniel-Echols, 2007).

Prior studies have indicated that educators, families, and policymakers do not necessarily share a common set of views about school readiness, and their opinions vary widely about the necessary skills of children when they start formal schooling (Cappelloni, 2010; Espinosa, Thornburg, & Mathews, 1997; Kotaman, 2012; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Noel, 2010; O'Donnell, 2008; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000; Şahin, Sak, & Tuncer, 2013; Tudge, Otero, Hogan, & Etz, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). In the relevant research literature, there is neither a universal agreement nor a commonly held belief about school readiness. For instance, in a large-scale longitudinal study conducted by Lin et al. (2003) that queried 3,305 kindergarten teachers' perceptions on children's readiness for school, overall findings from teacher-reported readiness items revealed a strong emphasis on the "social aspects of learning." Similar results were reported by Noel (2010) in her single-case qualitative study, which describes the school-readiness perceptions of preparatory (first year) teachers and school administrators in Queensland, Australia. The results indicated a complex and broad definition of school readiness that has been embraced by the teachers and administrators, mainly stressing the children's social-emotional traits and predisposition to learning as the most important child characteristics. Children's pre-academic skills are not regarded as largely related to school readiness by educators. However, in a phenomenological study of 9 Turkish teachers' views on school readiness, Kotaman (2012) reported different results. The teachers in this study highlight the importance of health screening, fine motor skills, self-confidence, self-expression, willingness to learn, toilet habits, and negative transfer (children starting school as a *tabula rasa*). In another large-scale US study of parents' perceptions of school readiness, O'Donnell (2008) argues that parents stress the significance of pre-academic skills in children's school readiness. It seems from the literature that opinions of educators and families on school readiness are broad, vary dramatically, and often focus on knowledge, skills, and characteristics that children possess. Furthermore, a quick literature review shows that, to the researchers' knowledge, none of the studies on school-readiness perception has examined the experiences of teachers, families, and children starting formal school, of which little is known, unfortunately. The current research has also aimed to fill in the gap in this area.

There is consensus in the research literature that it is essential to understand families' and teachers' views about the school readiness of children they teach, since the latter's success depends on how teachers perceive children when they start school (Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle, & Calkins, 2006; Lin et al., 2003; Piotrkowski et al., 2000). Examining teachers' and families' standpoints helps in understanding current practices in school-readiness assessment and thus ensures children's success in first grade and beyond. Although school-readiness assessments are commonly used in schools, teachers' and families' opinions about the skills needed by children to succeed in first grade can play a vital role in determining when formal schooling should start and what experiences should be offered to children based on their readiness.

As noted earlier, the new educational policy in Turkey lowered the minimum school-entry age from 6 to 5 years (72 to 60 months). However, policymakers have not paid appropriate attention to how schools, administrators, teachers, and families may interpret the changes and implement the new policy. A major problem with developing an educational policy today is that too much decision making takes place in boardrooms of policy offices and congress (Perez & Dagen, 2009); decisions are made and implemented without discussions with stakeholders such as educational organizations, schools, communities, and families that consider young children's well-being as much as, or maybe more than, policymakers do. This situation also holds true for Turkish educational policymaking.

This study examined the views of teachers and families on children's school readiness and their experiences with the new educational policy on school-entry age in Turkey. Specifically, it addressed the following four critical questions: (1) How do teachers and families perceive children's school readiness? (2) What are the experiences of teachers and families with the new educational policy on children's school-entry age of 60 to 72 months? (3) How do families justify their choice of having their children start school at 60 to 72 months old? (4) How are children, teachers, and families supported in the implementation of the new policy on school-entry age?

Method

A qualitative, interpretative research design was used in this study to find out the answers to the research questions. For the purposes of this research, using the grounded theory methods (*see* Discussion section, Figure 1) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), working hypotheses were generated from the views and experiences of study participants through the constant comparative method.

Sample

A convenient sampling technique was employed in this study to maximize the diversity of teachers and families with different demographic characteristics. The study sample consisted of 268 teachers (202 first-grade teachers and 66 principals—teachers with administrative roles) and 400 family members (248 mothers, 117 fathers, and 35 other family members) who reside in Ankara, Turkey's capital city. The teachers' ages ranged between 22 and 62 ($M=38.4$), and their years of teaching experience ranged between 1 and 43 ($M=15.3$). See Table 1 for further information on the study participants. The schools where the participant teachers serve were selected from different districts of Ankara to maximize the diversity of sample.

Table 1. Profile of Teachers and Families

	Gender		School Type		Degree Earned			Major		Total	
	F	M	Pb	Pr	HS ≤	AD	BS	MS ≥	E		NE
Teachers	187	81	234	34	0	43	200	25	199	69	268
Families	254	146	275	125	170	47	151	32	-	-	400

F: female; M: male; Pb: public; Pr: private; HS: high school; AD: associate degree; BS: Bachelor of Science; MS: Masters of Science; E: education; NE: non-education

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected through open-ended surveys and semi-structured interviews. Participants were also asked to provide demographic data. Participation in the research was voluntary. Both teachers and families were asked about their choice between responding to a survey or sharing their views and experiences in an interview. Out of the 268 teacher participants, 26 agreed to be interviewed, and the rest opted to fill in an open-ended questionnaire due to time limitations. None of the 400 family members who participated in this study chose the interview option due to practical issues, preferring the questionnaire instead.

The following questions were asked in both the surveys and interviews: (1) How would you define school readiness? (2) What skills do children need to master to be ready for first grade? (3) Could you please share your experiences with the implementation of the new educational policy on school entry age? (4) What kind of support were children, teachers, and families provided when children started school? Families were also queried to provide their justification for having their children start school between 60 and 72 months old.

Both the survey and interview data for this study were collected in Turkish, then transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. All the transcripts were read, converted into Microsoft Word files, and grouped according to participant profiles and survey/interview questions.

As noted earlier, grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to generate working hypotheses from the views and experiences of study participants through the constant comparative method. This method involved developing codes, categories, and themes inductively rather than imposing predetermined classifications on the data (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Comparative keyword analysis (CKA)² (Silverman, 2011) was conducted to identify these codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the data. This inductive process involved the researcher working back and forth between the themes and database until an inclusive set of major themes was established (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990).

Validity, Credibility and Reliability

To ensure validity and credibility, the researchers requested two colleagues with expertise in the research topic and background in early childhood and elementary education to comment on the survey/interview questions, as well as on the study design, research questions, and results as they emerged. To ensure content validity of the interview data (Hesse-Biber & Burke Johnson, 2015), researchers provided each respondent with a summary of his or her interview. At this point, respondents were able to make changes or corrections to their interview data, after which the researchers examined the responses.

Results

Teacher and Family Views on Children's School Readiness Skills

The data on teachers and families' views about school readiness highlighted the fact that both respondent groups associated children's school readiness with a wide range of skills—physical (particularly, fine motor), social-emotional, intellectual, language, and adaptive or self-help—and attitudes toward learning. However, the order of importance of these skills differed between teachers and families.

Analysis of the teacher data indicated that teachers' definitions of school readiness encompassed a broad spectrum of skills. Teachers considered skills such as self-care, fine motor, early literacy, communicating needs, wants, and thoughts, separation from parents, and social skills such as ability to interact with others, sharing, turn taking, and taking responsibility as the most important ones needed to have been mastered by children starting first grade. Other skills noted by teachers included attitude toward school, early numeracy, working independently, identifying self, listening and following directions, gross motor, self-esteem/self-confidence, attitudes toward learning, identifying objects (by shape, color, size, etc.), attention, identifying family and others in his/her social circle, distinguishing imagination from reality, speaking clearly and audibly, curiosity, problem solving, recognizing authority, sitting still, writing one's own name, etc. This variety was also reflected in individual teachers' views. For instance, one teacher commented, "A ready child is a child who has good eye-hand coordination, possesses early literacy skills, exhibits positive social behaviors when interacting with peers and adults, can take care of herself independently, and follows simple rules..."

² Prior to CKA, the researchers met to discuss CKA procedures in order to avoid any discrepancies.

Another respondent said,

“Being ready for school means that a child has acquired skills such as fine motor, social, self-care,... dressing, eating, proper toilet habits, personal hygiene, early literacy, early numeracy, expressing needs and wants, attitudes toward learning, adapting to a new environment...”

Analysis of the family data showed that families associated children’s school readiness most with skills such as fine motor, early literacy, early numeracy, identifying objects, self-care, and communicating needs, wants, and thoughts, listening and following directions, ability to interact with others. A close examination of the data showed that teachers and families shared common views on children’s school readiness. However, in defining children’s school readiness, families generally stressed the pre-academic physical and intellectual skills, while teachers tended to emphasize adaptive (self- help), fine motor, early literacy, and expressive language skills, and equally considered social and emotional aspects of school readiness as important.

Furthermore, in an effort to understand participant teachers’ and families’ views on school readiness, the researchers asked the respondents about their thoughts on its influencing factors. Participant teachers considered child characteristics, particularly the developmental ones, as the most influential factor in school readiness. Moreover, appropriate and sensitive parenting, absence of family support, and children in unsupportive and uneducated family environments were associated with children’s readiness by teachers. Furthermore, teachers thought that children’s social interaction, especially with their peers, serves as a catalyst to their readiness for school. One teacher said, “Children who are socially ready for school are able to make new friends at school without a problem and get along with their peers, and communicate well with everyone in school...” Another respondent commented, “...children’s interactions with their peers, especially during play, are important experiences that impact children’s school readiness. That’s how they learn socializing. Children who have problematic behaviors in their play with their peers have difficulties in early school adaptation.”

Some participant teachers also reported that children’s prior educational experiences, both at home and in early childhood education programs, influence their readiness for school. One teacher mentioned that children’s educational experiences prior to first grade smooth their transition to primary school. Another one noted that the diversity of children’s prior educational experiences impacts how ready they come to first grade. She said, “...We really see the benefit of a high quality, early childhood education experience when children start first grade.”

Moreover, technology and media were associated with children’s readiness by teachers. Participant teachers believed that technology and media, when used wisely, boost children’s development and learning, help them get ready for school, and improve their performance once they start. Computers, iPads, educational TV shows, and cartoons for young children introduce them to many early literacy and numeracy skills that are needed upon entering first grade.

Similar to the response of participant teachers, family members who participated in this study endorsed the idea that children’s school readiness mainly depends on their developmental characteristics, educational experiences at home and in early childhood education programs, parenting styles, and children’s interaction with their peers. According to participant families, children should have an early childhood education experience prior to starting first grade, regardless of age. In the words of one parent, “...the foundation of children’s education begins during the early childhood years.” Some family members also reported that how children are educated at home and how families treat their children (i.e., the time spent with children and child-rearing practices) are vital to prepare

children for school. Additionally, few family members indicated that children's interactions with their friends are crucial for their readiness to learn. These respondents thought that the more children interact with peers, the more they become sociable, and their ability to express themselves also improves.

Experiences with the Implementation of Educational Policy on School-Entry Age

Participant teachers and families expressed concerns about their ability to exercise the outcomes of the new educational policy. Several theme categories emerged from the data analysis: (1) problems associated with children's readiness skills, (2) problems associated with schools, (3) problems related to curriculum, (4) problems associated with teachers, and (5) no problems.

The analysis of the data showed that teachers reported a range of child associated problems with the implementation of the new educational policy. The most cited problem was that children in first grade aged between 60 and 72 months old lacked the necessary fine motor skills such as pencil grip and eye-hand coordination. Furthermore, participant teachers endorsed the idea that children had difficulty adapting to the school setting and culture. They stated that children, especially the ones with no prior early childhood education experience, struggled to make sense of the school environment and adapt to their new roles as students. One teacher said:

The kids who are registered this year do not seem to be ready for school. They cannot adapt to the primary school culture. They are play oriented. They need to be learning through play, which is not often used in primary school... They cannot listen and follow rules. They have a short attention span. They are not ready for 40-minute classes... Considering all these, it has been a tough year for us...

Teachers also noted that many children started first grade without the basic early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, and print awareness. They attributed such poor skills to the children's age, uneducated parents, and lack of early childhood education experience. Teachers also reported that children had issues with self-care skills (i.e., toilet habits, dressing, and personal hygiene). According to one teacher:

...I experienced so many problems this year with the students in my class. At the beginning of the semester, my classes were quite often interrupted with toilet issues. I often found myself confused about my role. I kept asking myself if I am a teacher or a caretaker. I do not remember the number of times I took children to the bathroom. And it is not just that. They also had issues related to personal hygiene...

Other problems with children's readiness skills that were encountered by participant teachers included emotional issues (separation from parents, fear of failure, reluctance, and frustration), lack of social skills (sharing, turn taking, and cooperation), lack of communication skills, listening and following directions, short attention span, early numeracy skills, boredom, sleep, and responsibility.

Participant teachers also reported problems associated with readiness of the schools, their readiness for the new first-grade curricula, and their competence to teach 60-to-72-month-old children. They considered their schools' physical environment as not prepared for the implementation of the new policy. The classroom size, furnishings, and materials were not considered conducive to teaching the pupils within the mentioned age range. Teachers also cited the lack of support for the teaching resources they need to adapt themselves to the new age group. To them, neither the MoNE nor the school administrators provided appropriate professional development related to the implementation of the new first-grade curricula. They shared their concerns about the inefficacy and inadequacy of the large-group, professional development seminars offered by the MoNE. Participant teachers said they were not guided well in using the new curricula. One teacher stated, "We were only given booklets that

explain the curricular changes and useless activity books to be used in the classrooms." A few teachers complained that they were not prepared to instruct children as young as this age group. These teachers admitted receiving neither support nor in-service training in teaching very young pupils.

On the contrary, some teachers reported not experiencing any problems with the implementation of the new educational policy on school-entry age. They cited their pragmatic response to make the new policy work for the benefit of their students and schools.

The results also highlighted the worries and concerns that families had to deal with regarding the new policy implementation. Generally, families complained about the lack of orientation offered by the schools, their children's process of adaptation, emotional issues their children experienced, as well as other challenges, including self-care, early literacy, and fine motor and communication skills. In addition, one fifth of the participant family members reported no problems with the policy implementation. Interestingly, the findings also revealed several advantages for families via their self-reported views and experiences. Several family members claimed that their children benefited from the new educational policy; the children's self-confidence increased, they became more sociable, as well as started taking more responsibilities and expressing themselves better.

To better understand the reactions of participant family members toward the implementation of the new educational policy, they were asked to explain their justification to have their children start school between 60 and 72 months of age. A number of factors emerged from the data analysis, including legal obligations, confidence, need for child care services, costly early childhood education services, prior early childhood education experience, academically oriented first-grade curriculum, and peer pressure.

Among these reasons, family members cited the legal obligation to enroll their children at the determined age range the most. Some parents made this decision because of their confidence that their children were ready to start first grade. One parent said, "I believed my daughter was ready for the first grade. She is a smart kid. I thought it was better for her to go to school, rather than stay at home with our caretaker." Interestingly, a few family members stated that despite the existence of the law, quite a few families they know opted out by obtaining a medical report indicating that their children were not yet developmentally ready to attend first grade. Early childhood education experiences played an important role as well in families' decisions to enroll their children at the required age; several families reported doing so, since they deemed such an advantage helpful in a smooth transition to first grade.

Working parents and their need for child care services were also influential in families' decisions; participant family members reported registering their children in first grade since they had no other alternative. Peer pressure felt by the children was another factor. One father admitted, "My son kept repeating... that all of his friends are going to school except him."

Costly early childhood education services were also a decisive factor; a few family members cited this expense as the rationale for registering their children in free primary school education. Families' perceptions of the academically oriented first-grade curriculum versus the less academic early childhood education experiences also constituted another reason; participant family members endorsed the idea that primary school education contributes better to their children's academic development. A few respondents also felt that their children would be labeled as 'left behind' if they chose to delay their children's entry to primary school.

Support Provided to Children, Teachers, and Families

In order to understand the support provided to teachers by their schools and the MoNE in implementing the new educational policy, teachers were asked about their experiences. In this regard, around one fifth of the teachers reported not receiving any support at all and felt they had been left alone in this process. Merely a few teachers indicated that they had benefited from the publications (curriculum guides and activity books) distributed by the MoNE prior to the beginning of the school year. According to those teachers, the MoNE suggested using the activity books during the initial two to three months. Teachers also did not find the large-group seminars offered by the MoNE as useful in adapting to the changes brought by the new policy.

Participant teachers were also asked to respond to questions about the support the children and families received from schools and the MoNE regarding the implementation of the new educational policy. The analysis of the responses showed some adaptations made to the schools' physical environment (child-size furniture and bathrooms, redesign of outdoor areas, and new materials/toys in classrooms); and, parent/family seminars and meetings were conducted by schools.

The family participants in this study were also asked to report the support they and their children received. The results somewhat confirmed the findings of the teacher data. Some family members claimed no support at all from teachers, schools, and the MoNE relating to the new policy implementation, whereas a few indicated they were offered seminars and orientation sessions by schools and teachers. The results also revealed that generally, the family members seemed unaware of the changes made in the physical environment of certain schools, or they apparently approved of the current conditions of the schools that their children attend.

Discussion

As mentioned, this study's purpose was to examine the views of teachers and families on children's school readiness, as well as their experiences with the new educational policy on school-entry age (60 to 72 months old). The grounded theory model for children's school readiness, derived from Strauss and Corbin's (1990) framework and developed from the present investigation, is shown in Figure 1.

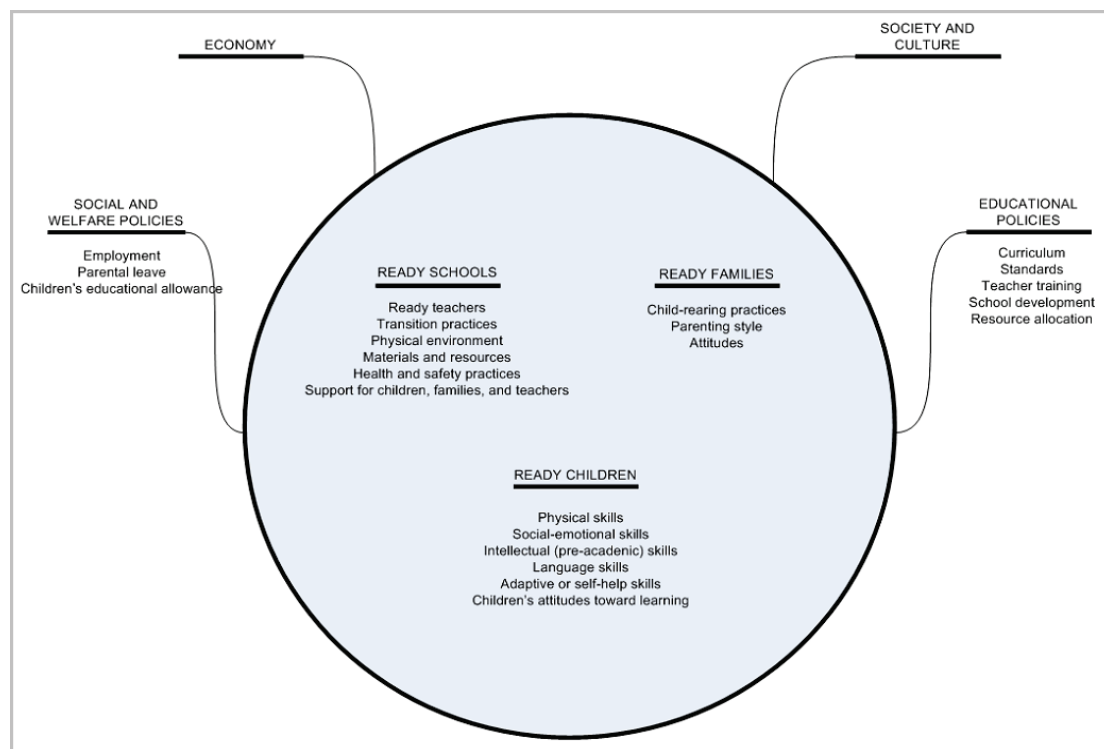


Figure 1. The Grounded Theory Model for Children's School Readiness

Teachers and families who participated in this study focused on a wide range of child skills and attributes to define school readiness. According to the respondents, school readiness means that children possess self-help (adaptive) skills; can communicate their needs, wants, and thoughts; and are enthusiastic about learning and curious in approaching new activities. The study participants also identified the importance of social skills (ability to interact with others, sharing, and turn taking) and pre-academic skills (fine motor, and early literacy and numeracy) as critical factors for school readiness. Due to its broad spectrum of developmental skills and abilities, children's school readiness should be considered as a holistic construct that includes different domains—physical, social-emotional, intellectual (pre-academic), language, adaptive or self-help—and children's approaches to (or attitudes toward) learning.

Given the expanded definition of school readiness proposed by participant teachers and families in this research, concrete action steps in educational policymaking should be taken to guide the development and implementation of a revised approach to serving children who will start and have already started school. Viewed within an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), school readiness is influenced by individual child characteristics, family characteristics (child-rearing practices and parenting style), school factors (teachers, transition practices, physical environment, materials and resources, health and safety practices, and support mechanisms for families and teachers), social and welfare policies (employment, parental leave, and educational allowance), cultural and societal factors (cultural viewpoints on readiness), socioeconomic factors (funding and resource allocation, and government incentives for private contributions to the educational system), and educational policymaking issues (curriculum, standards, teacher training, and school development). Thus, the researchers of this study suggest that promoting school readiness requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach, with families, teachers, school administrators, and educational policymakers playing key roles.

The results of the current study clearly showed (via self-reported experiences of teachers and families) some issues and challenges associated with children's school readiness and the current school-entry age. Fortunately, several solutions are possible to reduce the magnitude of these problems. First, support should be provided to schools, teachers, and families to recognize accurately the different developmental dimensions among children. To promote all these dimensions, there is a policy need to coordinate educational service delivery among various service agencies at the local and national levels. Kagan, Moore, and Bredekamp (1995) assert that such policy coordination should reflect a shared commitment of communities to support the efforts of schools, teachers, and families in order to provide a supportive environment for children in the larger society.

Considering the results of this study, a second action could be evaluating the first-grade curriculum to better respond to children's individual needs and to reduce the academic pressure that they may experience upon starting school. Such a wide range of abilities among children demands appropriate curricula and practices in terms of age and individual requirements. The MoNE should ensure that the first-grade curriculum is suitable to the developmental characteristics of this age group, encourage personalization to enable children to access the curriculum at the right level, reduce sources of stress for young children, and encourage teachers to adopt a developmentally appropriate pedagogy. These measures will help schools to be ready for children. The NEGP (1998) affirms that in order to do so, schools should build sufficient flexibility into their curriculum to respond to diverse needs and abilities of children within a class and to meet their changing needs over time.

The results of the current study highlighted the inadequacy of the physical environments of the schools; thus, redesigning the physical environment of the schools might be considered a third action step for educational policymaking perspective. Little attention was paid to the school environment factors when the education bill on school-entry age and compulsory education was passed by the Turkish government. Although important efforts have been made in recent years to improve learning environments throughout the country, many schools still offer poor conditions (inadequate school and

classroom sizes, limited facilities and resources, teacher-student ratio, etc.) that limit the children's school readiness and pose challenges to teachers. The MoNE should take into account that ready schools provide learning environments that are developmentally appropriate for children, ensuring their physical and emotional security, promoting education with interesting instructional materials, and responding to their evolving needs as they grow up (NEGP, 1998).

Fourth, the results concerning the teachers' views on school readiness and their experiences with the new education policy indicated that the teachers were not guided well in terms of assessing children's readiness skills. Thus, assessment procedures and instruments ought to be developed and calibrated to accommodate individual differences among children and to recognize and illuminate multiple expressions of outcomes on several dimensions (Kagan et al., 1995). To overcome the challenges that teachers faced with the implementation of the new educational policy on school entry age, a well-designed and employed developmental assessment process to determine children's readiness for school prior to the first grade is needed. Such a screening process may require time, personnel, and equipment, but may be well worth the effort.

Fifth, the findings of this study revealed that teachers endorsed views regarding a wide range of school readiness skills. They prioritized some of these skills and neglected the others. Their views on school readiness and their experiences with the implementation of the new educational policy on school entry age clearly show that teachers need training to understand, recognize, and nurture the multiple dimensions of children's readiness for school. This study's findings suggest that initial training and continuous in-service professional development for teachers should focus on developmentally appropriate instruction, transition programs (adaptation to school and school culture), active involvement of children in their own learning, dealing with emotional problems (separation anxiety, attachment, constant crying, etc.), and design of suitable learning environments. Professional development that focuses on the noted topics is vital for teachers as a qualified teaching staff and effective, ongoing professional development constitute a solid foundation of ready schools (NEGP, 1998).

As a sixth action step, the researchers of this study believe that children would benefit immensely from a particularly promising transition program for school readiness, implemented at the end of the kindergarten programs and/or at the beginning of first grade, which fosters children's social and emotional competence. The results of the current research suggest that children are vulnerable during transition periods and may experience problems adapting to the school setting and culture, since they have not yet developed a sense of belonging to their classroom and school (Rosier and McDonald, 2011). Such a program would ease children's transition to school and provide a strong model for the promotion of school readiness and school success (Blair, 2002).

The results also highlighted a lack of family support and inadequate collaboration between teachers and families during the implementation of the new educational policy. Therefore, a seventh action step could be developing strong connections among schools, teachers, and families, which are required for successful school readiness (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Teachers do not usually contact children's families prior to the pupils' entry to school (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). However, families can make a difference in children's school readiness. Bronfenbrenner (1989) suggests that children's everyday interactions with people around them, especially family members, are driving forces of their development. The characteristics and background of family members (their knowledge of child development, and ideas, values, and beliefs about child rearing) and the quality of interaction at home influence children's developmental skills that are needed to be prepared for school (Tudge et al., 2003). According to the framework proposed in this study, another important dimension of the school readiness paradigm involves the families' readiness themselves. Families shape the context in

which children grow and develop, framing children's most vital early experiences and encounters with their environments. Thus, family choices also influence children's school readiness. The families who participated in this study assume that there is a set of knowledge and skills that children need to acquire before they start school. In this regard, parents stress only a few aspects of school readiness—pre-academic knowledge and skills, self-care or adaptive skills, and communicating needs, wants, and thoughts. Most of them are not even aware of different dimensions of school readiness. Thus, there is a need for a strong school and family partnership program designed to increase family awareness, as well as to enrich educational environments at home. Support mechanisms for families on transition issues are especially needed to help children adapt to school without problems.

Moreover, the results of this study revealed that some families opted out of sending their children to school at the age of 60 to 72 months old by obtaining a medical report indicating that their children were not yet developmentally ready to attend primary school. The researchers believe that delaying the school-entry age is unlikely to be a satisfactory solution. Notwithstanding such a choice, some children will continue to be the youngest or oldest; some children will be less ready than others, and teachers will base their teaching on the average child's abilities, rather than individualizing their instruction (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Thus, the researchers of the current study believe that high-quality primary schools, appropriate curricula, professionally ready teachers, and support mechanisms for families and teachers are effective policies for improving readiness and eliminating this dilemma.

Because of this entry-age predicament, the Turkish government changed the cutoff date for school entrance prior to the conclusion of this research. The MoNE has taken a step back from the original plan by adopting a new regulation permitting children aged between 66 and 69 months to be exempted from attending first grade, upon their parents' petition filed with the school principal's office. Students who are 69, 70, or 71 months old may also request exemption with a medical report declaring current incapacity to attend primary school. This action step brings more concerns—it is more likely that well-educated parents would take advantage of this flexibility; children whose parents are not well-educated may not benefit. Given this concern and the fact that some families who participated in this study chose to register their kids in school due to costly early childhood education services, flexibility over school-entry age should be seriously considered on the condition that parents/families are provided access to free, full-time public kindergarten as an alternative to full-time primary schooling.

The actions taken by the MoNE highlight the importance of successful development and implementation of educational policy decisions. As is the case with any policy effort, Ackerman (2005) asserts that simply initiating an educational policy does not necessarily mean its goals will be achieved quickly. Effective policymaking on school-entry age and school readiness begins with an assessment of available resources, required investments, schools' capacities, curricula appropriateness, teachers' professional needs, and families' readiness in order to ensure success of such a policy. A new educational policy that mandates revised rules and regulations will have little impact without prior analysis, necessary changes, and informing and preparing schools, teachers, and families well in advance. For Ackerman (2005), seemingly straightforward policy initiatives are not necessarily self-actualizing in terms of achieving their premises or goals. To make effective use of new policies, multiple relevant variables should be considered. To determine if a policy solution will work with a particular problem, policymakers need to take into account the issue's manageability. Assessing tractability—the ease with which something can be controlled, shaped, or even changed (Ackerman, 2005)—also requires policymakers to measure precisely if existing resources are sufficient for successful implementation of the new policy, as well as to consider the difficulty of ensuring the targeted groups' compliance with the desired outcomes. Adopting a new educational policy will be the easiest task, compared with all the issues related to its effective implementation.

Implications, Limitations, and Further Research

The implications for teachers, parents/families, schools, teacher education programs, teacher educators, and educational policymakers have been considered in this study. Its results show the urgent need for upgrading teachers' knowledge and skills in terms of children's school readiness. The findings indicate that teachers lack awareness of all the dimensions of school readiness, and in-service training for them is limited and ineffective. Thus, professional development programs for teachers should be improved by schools and other related agencies, including teacher education programs at universities. The results also suggest a review of the curricula and practices in teacher education programs, particularly how pre-service teachers are being prepared for school readiness. Similar programs are also recommended for families, as the study's findings also highlight the need for support mechanisms for this group. Support programs should focus on dealing with attachment issues and transition to school, along with increasing parental awareness of school readiness and the content of student lessons in primary school.

This study's outcomes might also help with the development of a school-readiness index for Turkish children. Such information would be valuable for families, teachers, educational policymakers, and decision makers in general to understand better the factors affecting children's school readiness and subsequent school success.

The results of the current study might promote collaborative dialogues among educational policymakers, educational organizations and institutions, schools, teachers, families, and communities at large in order to foster shared responsibility, translate the policy more effectively into practice, and generate feedback for future policy development. This study's recommendations may also enhance the understanding and implementation of the policy on school entry-age in local contexts. Other implications of this research address policymakers; optimizing implementation of this new policy will most likely require ongoing, multilevel, and interrelated support. The results also emphasize the support mechanisms necessary for schools, teachers, and families to implement the new policy; however, how these support mechanisms can be equally optimized will probably require carefully constructed further research.

One limitation of the current study is its use of convenient sampling. Although the researchers did their best to make the sample as closely representative as possible of the population under study, the relative representation power of this sampling technique is not quite strong. Thus, to advance our understanding of the views and experiences of teachers and families relating to school readiness, further research should extend to a broader range of these groups. To enhance current knowledge and to validate and generalize the findings of this study, it should be replicated in elementary education programs in different parts of Turkey across other settings, with a broader representation of teachers and families.

Conclusion

School readiness and school-entry age continue to be a highly relevant topic among educators and policymakers across Turkey, as well as globally. This study demonstrates that school readiness encompasses multiple dimensions—physical, social-emotional, intellectual (pre-academic), language, adaptive or self-help—and children’s approaches to (or attitudes toward) learning. As Kagan and Rigby (2003) point out, such multifaceted characteristics require a diverse range of educational policy choices within multiple systems (i.e., education, economy, and social and welfare systems). School readiness does not reside solely in the child; it is a community issue and experience involving a wide spectrum of people and institutions—teachers, families, schools, communities, teacher education programs, educational policymakers, and governmental education offices. Dockett and Perry (2001) assert that when these people and institutions collaborate and when children realize they have the support they need, starting school can be a positive and exciting experience.

This study suggests that it is not just the school-entry age that matters; of equal significance are the first-grade curriculum, teacher and family competency for school readiness, the learning environments, and the practice of educational policymaking. It is hoped that this study has contributed to academic research and practice around the world by promoting constructive dialogues among educational policymakers, schools, teachers, families, and other stakeholders to improve school readiness and educational policymaking practices.

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