

An exploration of the term “school readiness” and the role of Sure Start Children’s Centres in supporting this.

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Introduction

Since Dame Tickell’s 2011 review of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and the subsequent introduction of a revised EYFS (2012), the term “school readiness” and its connotations have come to the forefront in early years. Yet the concept of school readiness is a wide ranging one, with many different aspects and features to it. To investigate what those people to whom school readiness is of practical significance understand by the term, interviews with parents, children and early years practitioners were carried out with three research questions in mind. Firstly, what is understood by the idea of school readiness? Secondly, what is the children’s centre doing to promote being prepared for school? And thirdly, what else could they be doing to ensure that children within their reach area are ready for school?

Methodology

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting between five and thirty minutes, which were then transcribed and coded to identify key themes in relation to popular aspects of the concept of school readiness.

Type of Participant	Practitioner	Parent	Child
Quantity	4	2	3
Participant Breakdown	1) Preschool Practitioner. 2) Year One Teacher. 3) Foundation Stage Teacher. 4) Children’s Centre Leader.	1) Laura, a mother of a reception-age child. 2) Trisha, a mother of reception-age twins.	1) Billie, 5 year old girl. 2) Kirstie, 5 year old girl. 3) Lewis, 4 year old boy.

Key Themes

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

The idea that personal, social and emotional development is important as a sound basis for beginning school was raised by all three types of research participant, especially practitioners. Within those areas, the trait of having confidence was one of the most mentioned aspect, as well as attributes that overall can be describe as self esteem – Dowling (1995:40) notes the link between being successful in school and being in possession of a high level of self-esteem, whilst Fabian (2002:5) credits self-esteem as “a significant factor in being a successful learner”.

“Schoolification” as Preparation

Above all, children (and to some extent parents) listed academic traits – such as writing and numeracy – as evidence of being school ready. Yet practitioners viewed these traits as much less important, although predicted that parents and children would value them. The significance given to academic ability highlights the OECD’s (2006) view that the English-speaking world regards early years care and education as “schoolification”, in contrast to the Nordic countries, whose holistic early education rather focusses preparing the child for life.

Sure Start’s Role in School Readiness

Parents and practitioners identified ways in which children’s centres promoted school readiness, for example in terms of social skills, encouraging independence and running programmes to “narrow the gap” aimed to boost development in children working at below their expected level. However, parents were unable to suggest further ways in which the centre could help prepare children for school, instead seeing it as a parent’s responsibility to ensure their children were ready.

Developing Communication and Language

Seven of the nine participants identified elements of communication and language that are required for school readiness, with the children most of all believing that they would have to follow instructions to be ready for year one. Elkind (2003) credits the ability to communicate well as one of the skills that will enable a smooth transition into formal schooling, more so than academic preparation in literacy or numeracy - in particular referring to the ability to “listen and follow instructions given by an adult”.

Too Soon Too Young?

Although participants were not asked specifically on school starting ages or readiness for school in relation to age, several adult participants referred to the age of children. They raised concerns about whether they were old enough to be starting and whether formal schooling should be compulsory at aged five, drawing attention also to struggles faced by summer-born children. This view is shared by Whitebread and Bingham (2012), who state that the “ ‘earlier is better’ approach in relation to children in the early years is misguided.”

Practical Skills for School

All participants identified practical abilities needed to begin school, such as being toilet-trained, understand self-care, do buckles and zips and open lunch boxes. These skills were predominantly suggested by adults, with one teacher giving parents a “wish list” of practical skills to work on in the summer before beginning in their class. However, children too recognised necessary practical skills, with Billie stating: “*If you can’t dress yourself, you can’t be in Year One.*”

Conclusion

Participants recognised that there are attributes that complement being ready for school, and identified that school readiness is not solely the responsibility of the child, complementing UNICEF’s (2012) approach to school readiness as a tri-faceted model, requiring the need for ready children, ready schools and ready families. Although ways in which Sure Start promotes school readiness were identified, more could be done – including increasing communication between all involved parties, in order to clarify expectations of being school ready. This is particular relevant for the children themselves, as whilst there is an increased degree of correlation between what parents and practitioners believe are school-ready attributes, this is not reflected in children’s opinions of what skills they need for school.

References

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