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School readiness among preschool children

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Abstract

With Vision 2020 only 10 years away, Malaysia is far from reaching her goals as there are still school students who face problems mastering reading writing and arithmetic skills (3R's). This of course will hinder the production of highly skilled and educated human modals that are greatly needed for the nation's progress. Associations are often made between children's level of school readiness and their school achievement. Children with higher level of school readiness experience a smoother transition into Year 1 of the elementary school. This study examines children's level of school readiness based on their backgrounds. Using stratified random technique the sample consisted of 377 children attending government preschools, government agencies preschools and private preschools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Parents completed forms reporting background demographics and kindergarten teachers reported on children's level of school readiness using a multidimensional assessment School Readiness (Year One). Descriptive statistics showed children scored the highest in moral readiness and lowest in socioemotional readiness. Overall, the children showed a medium level of readiness to enter Year 1. Findings from this study suggest that children's socioemotional development might have been overlooked by parents. The study also suggests that disadvantaged parents need support to become knowledge able and to practice more positive parenting, carry out stimulating activities with their children, and have the means to create a better home learning environment to enhance their children's development.

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Keywords: School readiness, children background, parental involvement

1. Introduction

Transition of preschool children in Malaysia to Year One in the is a challenging period for them. These children need to adapt to new environment in their schools. Dockett and Perry (2007) described the transition to school as a period in which the children change their role as a child in the school community. This involves changing roles, identities, and expectations of children as well as involving a change in the pattern of interactions and relationships between the children with the people around them, such as teachers and peers (Dockett & Perry 2007). In addition, children are also expected to be ready to engage effectively in learning and performing into Year One.

Children often demonstrate different readiness particularly in the cognitive and socioemotional skills (Smart et al. 2008). Smooth transition to school is important because the child's readiness can predict their performance in the near future. Children who are less ready are likely to succeed academically and less likely to experience behavioral and emotional problems. They are less likely to be school dropouts (Duncan et al. 2007). Children who are less prepared for school are more likely to become teen parents, engage in criminal activity, and have a job that did not survive (Schweinhart 2003).

Therefore, school readiness of children can enhance academic achievement and the development of children's (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003). Their readiness varies according to the current experience in pre-school, pre-school locations, and educational background and economic status of parents (Rohaty 2009). Such variation affects human capital development as academic achievement and future career success can be predicted based on their readiness to

school (Boethel 2004; Dockett and Perry 2007; Lee et al. 2006). Children who are more ready will show higher achievement than children with lower levels of readiness. Skills gained early provide a solid foundation for future success (Cunha et al. 2006).

1.1 Problem Statement

Lack of school readiness can cause children to face problems in schools. Primary school pupils who have not mastered the 3R's are potential dropouts. In 2004, there were over 115,000 (7.7%) of pupils at primary school that have yet to master the skills of 3M (KPM 2006).

Dropout rate that exists in the primary education level is at 1.9% in urban and 1.2% in rural areas for the cohort 1994 to 2004. In 2008 is that there are about 54,000 (13%) of pupils who are unable to read and write. Such problem may be reduced if parents play an active role in preparing their children to school. Parents are able to increase the readiness of their children to school if they have the knowledge, skills and support. They need to practice positive parenting styles and conduct the activities that can stimulate the development of their children from the start.

1.2 Aims of Study

This main aims of the study were to (a) examine the differences in the readiness of children to schools based on their socio- educational background and (b) to identify the readiness of children to school in nine aspects of school readiness. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What is the level of readiness of children in the respective domains of development?
2. Are there any significant differences in terms of the readiness of children to schools based on:
 - i. Frequencies of parents' involvement in their childrens development.
 - ii. The amount of time parents spent on their childrens' development.

1.3 Hypothesis

The null hypothesis of the study were:

- Ho1: There was no significant differences in school readiness based on the frequency of parents involvement in child development.
- Ho2: There was no significant differences in school readiness based on the amount of time parents were involved in child development.

2. Methodology

This study is a quantitative research survey using the questionnaire as *Year One Readiness Scale* (Rohaty 2009). This questionnaire consists of two parts. Part A contains 18 items to obtain information on the background of the respondents. For this purpose, researchers have to provide demographic information form for parents to complete.

Part B, comprising 80 items was divided into nine constructs of academic readiness (10 items), socio-emotional readiness (8 items), physical readiness (gross motor :8 items), fine motor readiness (8 items), self-help skills (7 items), language and communication readiness (12 items), moral readiness (8 items), aesthetic and creative readiness (9 items) and civic readiness (10 items). Each item uses a 5-point Likert scale scale of 1 referring to the least agreement and 5 for strongly agree. A pilot study conducted found that the overall alpha value for all aspects of school readiness is high at 0.9773.

The population consists of government pre-school children, preschool children of government agencies, and private sector preschools. A stratified random technique delineating specific zones including Pudu, Keramat, Bangsar and Sentul zones was conducted. A total of 377 preschool children aged six years were selected involving 134 preschool children of government, 130 from government agencies and 113 from the private sector. A total of 26 kindergarten teachers were also involved in this study for rating the readiness of each child. Teachers are regarded as the most reliable respondents due to their close interactions with children.

3. Findings

The findings show that academic and socio-emotional readiness and fine motor skills (mean=3.813) (mean=3.614), (mean=3.481) respectively were ranked moderately high. Other aspects of school readiness were ranked very high including gross motor skills readiness (mean=4.027), self-help skills readiness (mean =4.110), language and communication (mean=4.006), the moral readiness (mean= 4.298), aesthetic and creative readiness (mean=4.063), national civic-mindedness (mean=4.143).

Table 1. Mean scores, frequencies, and percentages of different aspects of School Readiness

Aspect of School Readiness	Frequency and Percentage				Mean Score	Interpretation of mean score
	Mean Score 1.00-2.00 (Very Low)	Mean Score 2.01 -3.00 (Low)	Mean Score 3.01-4.00 (High)	Mean Score 4.01-5.00 (Very High)		
Academic Readiness	0 (0.0%)	57 (15.1%)	237 (62.9%)	83 (22.0%)	3.614	High
Socio-emotional Readiness	5 (1.3%)	96 (25.5%)	212 (56.2%)	64 (17.0%)	3.481	High
Gross motor physical readiness	1 (0.3%)	21 (5.6%)	177 (46.9%)	178 (47.2%)	4.027	Very High
Fine motor physical readiness	1 (0.3%)	37 (9.8%)	221 (58.6%)	118 (31.3%)	3.813	High
Self help readiness	2 (0.5%)	20 (5.3%)	154 (40.8%)	201 (53.3%)	4.110	Very High
Language & communication readiness	1 (0.3%)	23 (6.1%)	174 (46.2%)	179 (47.5%)	4.006	Very High
Moral readiness	1 (0.3%)	12 (3.2%)	109 (28.9%)	255 (67.6%)	4.298	Very High
Aesthetic and creative readiness	0 (0.0%)	19 (5.0%)	174 (46.2%)	184 (48.8%)	4.063	Very High
National realation readiness	0 (0.0%)	11 (2.9%)	148 (39.3%)	218 (57.8%)	4.143	Very High
Overall level of school readiness					3.950	High

1. Frequency of parents of children involvement in child development

Ho1: There was no significant differences in school readiness between children based on the frequency of parents involvement.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA test results for the mean difference between the school readinesses of children based on frequency of parental involvement

Sources of variation	Sum of square	df	MeanSquare	F	Sig.
Among groups	1.205	2	0.602	4.143	0.017*
In groups	31.257	215	0.145		
Total	32.462	217			

* Significant $p < 0.05$

Table 2 show that there are significant differences in school readiness based on the frequency of father involvement ($F = 4.143$, $p < 0.05$.) Thus the null hypothesis 1 is rejected. To determine which groups contribute to the significance, the test post-hoc Tukey HSD was performed.

Table 2.1. The post-hoc tests Tukey HSD

Frequency of parental involvement(I)	Frequency of parental involvement(J)	Mean difference (I-J)	R.Standard	Sig.
Often	Seldom	0.153 (*)	0.624	0.040
	Rare	0.156 (*)	0.629	0.038

* Significant $p < 0.05$

Table 2.1 showed that the level of school readiness for children who have parents who are often involved in their development is higher than for those who were involved sometimes and rarely.

2. The amount of time parents were involved in child development

Ho2: There were no significant differences in school readiness based on the amount of time parents spent with their children.

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA on school readiness of children based upon amount of time parents spent with their children

Sources of variation	Sum of square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Among groups	1.661	2	0.830	4.485	0.012*
In groups	69.247	374	0.185		
Total	70.908	376			

* Significant $p < 0.05$

Table 3 showed that there were significant differences in school readiness based on the amount of time parents were involved in their children's development ($F=4.485, p<0.05$). Thus the null hypothesis 2 is rejected. To determine which groups contribute to the significance, Post-Hoc test Tukey HSD was performed.

Table 3.1. Test results post-hoc Tukey HSD

Frequency time parents' spent (I)	Frequency time parents spent in a day (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	R.Standard	Sig.
High	Low	0.153 (*)	0.054	0.017
	Moderate	0.134 (*)	0.055	0.041

* Significant $p < 0.05$

Post-hoc test results showed the level of school readiness for children whose parents spent more time with their children were higher than children whose parents who spent at a low and moderate level.

4. Discussion

This study shows that generally there were high levels of school readiness amongst the six year olds who were about to register into Year 1 of the Elementary School. This could probably be explained by the fact that city preschool centers are always too conscious of their roles as academic taskmasters preparing children for formal education. Another reason could be explained by the expectation of parents for their children to acquire school readiness skills much earlier to enter the rat race more confidently. It can also be explained by the fact that most of the preschool centres follow the National Preschool curriculum which stresses common aims and values.

The results show that the level of school readiness for children who have parents involved in their development is higher than children who don't have parents involved in their development. These findings are consistent with the findings of Willms (2001) and Manning and Lamb (2003) that support the involvement of parents enhance their children's readiness for school. This study found that there were differences in the school readiness of children based on the frequency of parents involvement. Manning and Lamb (2003) describe children who were close to their parents while growing up with lesser behavioral problems and have better grades in school. King (2006) also found similar findings in his study and has denied the notion that parent involvement is not related to the welfare of children. These findings are consistent with Willms (2001) that support parents who spend more time with their children have children who are better prepared for school.

The results show the level of school readiness for children whose parents spent more time with their children are higher than those children whose parents are involved at a low and medium level. These findings are consistent with the findings of the study by the Chazan-Cohen (2009), Kiernan et al. (2008), Martin et al. (2007), McWayne et al. (2004), Sanson et al. (2002), and Sylva et al. (2004) that support parental involvement in children's development to improve the school readiness of their children. McWayne et al. (2004) explained that parents who actively participate and promote learning at home had children who showed a good relationship with peers, adults and are positively involved in learning. Yan and Lin (2002) explain that parental involvement which is higher in children's learning affect the performance of children in schools, including school performance. Fantuzzo and McWayne (2002) found that more parental time spent will enhance the social and emotional development of children.

5. Implication

This study has shown there are differences in the readiness of children to schools based on their family background. Parents as the first teachers of children have a responsibility to encourage children's learning. However, the ability of parents to prepare their children to schools varies according to family background. The implications for improving the school readiness of children to include: a) A module on school readiness for parents to better understand this concept; b) Interventions developed for school readiness and activities can be accessible by parents when needed; c) Screening preschool children for school readiness should be a national agenda; d) Parents programmes should be given a wider exposure; e) Parenting programs should be organized by local communities continuously; g) The involvement of parents in child development should be emphasized.

6. Conclusion

Continued support should be given to disadvantaged parents so that they have the knowledge and resources to provide for their children to school. However, the knowledge, skills, and awareness should be incorporated into parent education programmes, regardless of their background so that each parent plays an important role in providing for their children's education. Human capital will be a major force in the realization of Vision 2020 and preschool education is the foundation.

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