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**Evaluation of the adaptation of 66-72 month
old children to primary schools in Turkey**

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to determine the views of first grade primary school teachers regarding how 66 to 72 month-old children adapt to school. The working group of this study consists of 25 classroom teachers who work at first grade schools and who have 66 to 72 month-old children in their classes. Personal information form (a) and Interview form (b) were used to gather information during the study. In addition to using a "descriptive analysis" of qualitative research methods, the frequency of the teachers' responses has been expressed numerically and interpreted. During interviews with the teachers, it was determined that some developmental delays (in terms of dexterity disabilities, difficulties in learning, and so on) were observed in children who began primary school between the ages of 66 to 72 months, compared to other children. In addition, these children experienced difficulties in controlling their toileting and adapting to their school. Teachers pointed out that if children attended nurseries or preschool, developmental differences among children could be eliminated.

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1. Introduction

Without doubt, in Turkey among the subjects most discussed in recent years, is the early start of school education, or compulsory registration of 55 month-old children in primary schools. This situation is one the most criticised principles of educational reform. A number of educators, government officials and academics have expressed their opinions on this. However, 66 month-old children began primary school during the 2012-2013 academic year, and even though the subject is still very controversial, they are continuing with their education. For this reason, the views of teachers of this age group are very important regarding the adaptation and compliance of these children to school.

The foundation of success during secondary and higher education lies in education during the early years. Children's learning outcomes acquired in early years affects academic success during later years (Ansari & Winsler, 2012; Lou, Li, & Rao, 2011). One of the basic factors for being successful in the academic sense, during early childhood, is the child being prepared for the challenges that will face him or her during their education (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Kayili & Ari, 2011).

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Being prepared for school is very important for families, academics, lawmakers and all stakeholders who participate in training, and who are interested in early childhood education. It is a skill that must be gained until the age of five (Harrington, Des Jardin & Shea, 2010; Prior, Bavin & Ong, 2011). Being prepared for school is a subject that closely relates different disciplines (Ansari & Winsler, 2012; Cristoforo & Le Monda, 2011; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Prior, Bavin & Ong, 2011). Being prepared for school hosts within itself five important fields; a composed of use of language, cognitive and generic skills, achieving sufficient physical maturity and being healthy in general, social and emotional development, and learning approaches. In addition to all of the above reading, writing, mathematics and creative arts are also very important for the child in moving to primary school (Bell, Greenfield, Bulotsky-Shearer, 2013; Cristoforo & LeMonda, 2011; Fram, Kim & Sinha, 2012; Lou, Li & Rao, 2011). Among these skills, early literacy and mathematics are grouped as “difficult skills”, and social skills are grouped as relatively "soft skills". Which of these is more effective in preparing a child for school is still being investigated by education scientists (Fram, Kim & Sinha, 2012). If the child falls behind his peers, with regards to being prepared for school, it becomes either very difficult or impossible for the child to achieve their *potential* in later years (Ansari & Winsler, 2012).

Since the early 1990s, preparedness of children to school has increasingly attracted the attention of many experts from all over the world (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Fram, Kim & Sinha, 2012; Lou, Li & Rao, 2011; Prior, Bavin & Ong, 2011). Being prepared for school is the maturity displayed by children in the face of transition to the school environment. For this reason, children gain knowledge, skills and abilities required for other levels of education at pre-school educational institutions. Getting children prepared for school is one of the aims of pre-school education (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Heller, Rice, Boothe, Sidell, Vaughn, Keyes & Nagle, 2012).

Preparedness of children to school makes a contribution not only to the children, but it also makes important contributions to their countries and their economy. A child who has gained preparedness to school is more successful in the academic sense (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Thus, his opportunity to work at jobs that can afford to pay more taxes increases. In addition to this, a child with a higher level of preparedness to school is more beneficial to the country's economy in terms of health expenditures (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

It is a known fact that the motivation and social-emotional skills of pre-school teachers play important roles with regards to success in school. In addition to this, a close relationship established by children with their teachers, enables them to develop self-confidence and social-emotional skills (Heller et al., 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, among the shareholders that affect the preparedness for school, the home and school are the powers of the micro system. Other educational institutions are the powers of the mezzo system, and the economic institutions of the country, which invest in the country's education, are the powers of the macro system (McGettigan & Gray, 2012).

2. Method

2.1. Model of the study

This study is a qualitative study aimed at determining the views of first-class teachers working at primary schools, regarding the adaptation of 66 to 72 month-old children to school. A survey pattern was used during the study.

2.2. Working group

The working group consisted of 25 classroom teachers serving at Kastamonu Province in Turkey. All of the teachers who participated in the study had 66 to 72 month-old children in their classrooms.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Demographic characteristics	f
Educational level	
Bachelor's Degree	20
Associate Degree	5
Total	25
Age	
26-35	10
36-45	8
46 and above	7
Total	25
Job seniority	
1-10 years	7
11-20 years	7
21 years and above	11
Total	25

2.3. Data collection and analysis process

Interview forms, containing structured and semi-structured questions developed by the researchers, were used to gather information. There were a total of nine structured and semi-structured questions on the interview forms, relating to teachers' views regarding the adaptation of 66 to 72 month-old children to school. A descriptive analysis technique was during the analysis.

3. Findings

The findings were deduced by analysing the data and will be included in this section of the study. The findings will be explained in the same order as the questions were asked on the interview form.

3.1. 66 to 72 month-old children and their developmental characteristics

In Turkey a pre-school education programme is being applied to 36 to 72 month-old children. These children were classified in three age groups; 36 to 48; 48 to 60; and 60 to 72 months old depending on their developmental characteristics. Objectives and achievements were determined at 36 to 72 months, and the teacher was given flexibility in the application of the programme. Together with the Ministry of Education's decision related to 66 months old children's mandatory beginning in primary school during 2012-2013 academic year, families of 66 month-old and older children experienced indecision in regards to having 66 months or older children beginning primary school education but due to the determined attitude of the Ministry of National Education, a lot of 66-72 months or older children began primary education.

Table 2 shows the responses of primary school first grade teachers regarding the developmental characteristics and attention spans of 66 to 72 month-old children.

Table 2: Views of teachers regarding the developmental characteristics of 66 to 72 month-old children

Are there any differences in the attentions spans of 66 to 72 month-old children in your classroom compared to other children?	f
Yes	17
No	3
Partially	5
Total	25
Do you observe any distinct developmental delays in these children (66 to 72 month-old), compared to children of other age groups?	
No	7
Yes	18
• Hand skills (hand muscles) undeveloped	13

• Difficulties experienced in learning	5
• Hand-eye coordination deficiencies	3
• Development of language deficiencies	2

With regards to any differences between the attention spans of students, a majority of teachers (N=17) pointed out that 66 to 72 month-old students had more limited attention spans. When the teachers were asked in what fields they observed developmental delays, it was determined that they lagged behind other students in dexterity; that is psychomotor development. In addition, they had difficulties in learning, deficiencies in eye-hand coordination, and language development. The views of some of the teachers were as follows:

“Developmental delays of 66-72 months old children who had received kindergarten training are not in question. But there are developmental delays in children who had not received any preschool training.” (Ö12)

“I have observed that fine motor muscles have not developed. Especially they encounter difficulties in fitting their writing in the required space on striped notebooks and their writing is very large.” (Ö15)

3.2. . 66 to 72 Month-Old Children and School

Children spend most of their time at school. For that reason school is a place where children acquire social behaviour in addition to academic knowledge.

Table 3 shows the responses of primary school first grade teachers when asked about their views on the school lives of 66 to 72 month-old children.

Table 3: Views of teachers on the school lives of 66 to 72 month-old children

Have you encountered exceptional cases or events arising from the development characteristics of 66 to 72 month-old children and if so, please summarise?	f
No	11
Yes	14
• Toilet Control Related Experiences	7
• Experiences Related to Self-Care Skills	10
• Various Disabilities	6
Were there any school related adverse judgments made by these children (66 to 72 months)? Please explain.	
No	13
Yes	12
• Fear of School	5
• Compliance Difficulties to school	7
How are the relationship behaviours of these children (66 to 72 months) with their friends?	
Normal (do not have significant differences from other children)	17
Avoidant Behaviours	6
Exposure to violence of older children	2
Do you think these children are happy at school (66 to 72 months) and why?	
Yes	15
No	10
• Unhappy during academic activities	10

More than half of the teachers (N=14) reported experiencing difficulties within the classroom environment, resulting from developmental characteristics. Foremost among these were problems related to self-care skills. The views of some teachers are as follows:

“He is not capable of going to the toilet alone.” (Ö4),

“It creates problems such as unable to go to the toilet, unable to pull his pants, unable to open his zip.” (Ö5)

“We have students who fall off the desk, soil their underclothes, unable to wear his jacket alone and those who are unable to gather their belongings.” (Ö9)

With regards to students forming negative judgments about the school, half of the teachers stated they had experienced such difficulties (N=12). Some of the views were:

“They are happy to come to school but as soon as they encounter difficulties in dictating, they quit. On the other hand, children who are 72 months old or older try harder in order to write.” (Ö15)

“They had negative judgments. They are able to say that they cannot do it. When they are unable to do something, they say that they will not do it at the school but they will do it at home ...” (Ö16)

The teachers pointed out that 66 to 72 month-old students encountered no problems in relationships with their friends, and even if they are generally happy in school, they became very unhappy, especially when unsuccessful during training activities. Some of these views are as follows:

“They are sometimes happy while they are playing games, they are happy. In the class room they quickly become very unhappy when they are unsuccessful.” (Ö8).

“The school is far away from meeting their game expectations. For that reason, we have observed that the students get bored because of the shortness of the breaks and the length of classroom period.” (Ö10).

3.3. 66-72 month-old children and the teachers

Some teachers (f:6) stated their own children were at the same age (66 to 72 months old), and therefore they experienced the same dilemmas.

Table 4 shows responses by primary school teachers to questions on their qualifications, and their suggestions in relation to the training of 66 to 72 month-old children.

Table 4: Views of teachers regarding qualifications related to the training of 66 to 72 month-old children and their suggestions

Do you consider yourself qualified in knowing the developmental characteristics of these children (66 to 72 months) and planning the most appropriate teaching-learning process?	f
Yes	13
Partially	4
No	8
• Planning the Appropriate Teaching-learning Process	4
• Knowing the Developmental Characteristics	4
If your own child was between 66 to 72 months old, would you send him to a primary school this year (2012 - 2013 academic year) and why?	
Yes	5
I would have evaluated him according to his development level	3
No	17
• His developmental characteristics would have been insufficient	10
• He would have lagged behind other children	7
Is there anything else you would like to add with regards to the orientation of 66 to 72 month-old children attending school?	
Before beginning primary school, a child should receive pre-school kindergarten training	17
Problems are experienced with regards to school rules	5
Teachers are required to play very important roles	3

Half of the teachers (N=13) believe they are qualified in planning the process of teaching and learning for 66 to 72 month-old children. Eight teachers consider themselves unqualified, and state in general that they are not qualified in planning the process and developmental characteristics.

When the teachers were asked if they would have sent their own children to school at the age of 66 to 72 months, a great majority (N=17) gave negative responses. The reason for giving negative responses was their belief that the developmental characteristics of their children were insufficient, and they may lag behind other children in the same classroom. Some of the teacher's views in this regard are provided below:

“I would not have sent my kid, because education is a long process. In addition, a lesson like mathematics needs abstract intelligence. Even if they learn how to read and write, abstract intelligence develops during later stages.” (Ö4)

“I have a child at the same age but I did not send him to school. This year the system and programme are new. Many problems may be encountered. That is why I did not send my child to school.” (Ö12)

“I would not have sent my kid, because I was sent to school early also. I remember how my arm hurt while I was writing. Even remembering that makes me feel uneasy. That is why I feel so nervous about sending my child to school early.” (Ö15).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The results of this study, conducted to determine the views of primary school first grade teachers on sending children to school between the ages of 66 to 72 months, can be summarised as follows:

- With regards to the question whether there are differences in the attention span of students, a great majority (N=17) of the teachers responded by saying that a 66 to 72 month-old child had a very limited attention span. For example, difficulty in learning and manual dexterity, deficits in the development of hand-eye coordination and language.
- More than half of the teachers (N=14) stated they had experienced problems in the classroom arising from developmental characteristics. Most important were problems related to self-care skills and negative judgments of the school.
- Half of the teachers (N=13) were of the opinion that they were capable of planning the learning and teaching process for 66 to 72 month-old students. When the teachers were asked whether they would have sent their own children to school at the age of 66 to 72 months, a great majority (N=17) gave negative responses. The rationale behind the negative responses was their belief that the developmental characteristics of their children were insufficient, and that they might lag behind other children in the same classroom.

Within the context of these results, the following recommendations may be made:

- Compared to pre-school education, primary school is a process where there are more academic activities. Therefore, for this education experience a student needs to have acquired some basic skills. If the children were to attend a pre-school educational institution before beginning primary school, developmental differences between the children would be minimised, and difficulties during the teaching and learning process would not be experienced.
- While developing teaching and training programmes, making pilot applications and afterwards completion of the shortcomings of these pilot applications is a generally accepted and applied method. Decisions should be made and applied following pilot applications during educational reforms also.

Teachers are one of the most important factors affecting children in adapting to school. Primary school teachers are especially required to be well-qualified in this regard. For this reason, these teachers need to receive professional in-service training.

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