



WCLTA 2013

School Entry Age: 66 Months of Age for Literacy Skills

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Abstract

The new Compulsory Education Law enacted in 2012 lowered school entry age from 72 months to 66 in Turkey. The interaction among age, schooling, and early literacy has been issue of interest. The aim of this study was to examine literacy development of first graders in terms of school entry age and pre-schooling. This qualitative case study was conducted at three primary schools in Ankara. One of them was a private primary school in which children of high income families attended. The other two were state primary schools; in one of which children of middle -income families, and in the other, children of low-income families attended. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The participants of the study were nine first grade teachers to give implications from classroom settings via their experiences. The curriculum guide and annual/daily lesson plans of grade 1 Turkish course were also analyzed. The findings indicated that the children below 72 months had shorter attention span and their literacy development took longer time. Effective literacy training at pre-school stage had positive influence on the literacy.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

Keywords: Primary education; school entry age, early literacy; phoneme awareness; word recognition;

Introduction

The international variation in school entry age (SEA) is within the four (48 months) - to seven (84 months)-year-old range. The appropriate time for SEA is a complex issue due to numerous influential factors, and the literature presents inconclusive results. For example, Wils (2004) examined children in Mozambic and other 26 developing countries and found a negative correlation between late entry and survival ratios. She speculated that there might be reasons other than age explaining this relationship. Firstly, parents who send their children to school as early as permitted might be more motivated about education. Secondly, older children might be more likely than younger children to have responsibilities within the household or at work leading to drop-out (cited in Nonoyama-Tarumi,

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Loaiza & Engle 2010, p. 106). On the other hand, Bedard and Dhuey (2006) found that one year late enrolment caused decrease in grade retention, and increase in test scores until the eighth grade in the United States and Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Although the literature gives little evidence whether earlier or later SEA gives better educational results, it is clear that important learning characteristics such as self-esteem, motivation and confidence are established before the age of 6 (e.g. Schagan & Sainsbury, 1996; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Marcon, 2002; cited in Cassidy, 2005, p. 144). Furthermore, children’s literacy skills such as phonological, phonemic and morphological awareness should be developed from an early age (NCCA, 2012). Digital literacy, which is the key concept of the New Millennium, might be another challenge, and require us to revise the perspectives of early literacy development. A study conducted in the USA indicated that children under the age of 6 are immersed in technology use from birth (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). However, the literature discussed below gives no clues about the relationship between literacy development and SEA.

Children in New Zealand begin to take intensive reading instruction at age five, which results in quite high reading achievement. However, this requires further consideration since this success is true for the top readers, and there is a large gap between the top and the bottom readers (Suggate, 2009). Reports from parents in South Africa indicate that learners who started school at ages 6 and 7 achieved higher reading performance outcomes than learners who started school either younger or older (PIRLS, 2006). A positive age effect was found on Reading, Mathematics and Science performance of the children in Hungary where compulsory primary education starts at six (Hámori, 2007). Elley (1992) analysed data across 32 countries from the 1990–1991 the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement study. Elley (1992) then compared the mean reading performance of nine-year-old children in the top 10 and bottom 10 performing countries. When economic and social factors were controlled, the countries with the highest adjusted reading performance at age nine began school nearly six months earlier on average, suggesting a slight advantage for earlier beginners. However, these findings require replication (cited in Suggate, 2009, p. 154). The re-analysis of the data from the reading portion of the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study suggested no significant association between reading achievement and SEA (Suggate, 2009).

The new Compulsory Education Law enacted in 2012 lowered SEA from 72 months to 66 in Turkey. Firstly, the education reform bill proposed to drop the beginning of education to 60 plus age. However, it generated heated debates, and then the bill passed by the parliament after raising SAE to 66 months. Although debates increasingly continue, most of them rely on the ideas that do not have sufficient scientific basis. Due to the fact that learning to read and entering school are among the most critical experiences in life span, the aim of this study was to examine literacy development of first graders with specific reference to school entry age and pre-schooling.

1. Method

This qualitative case study was conducted at three primary schools. One of them was a private primary school in which children of high income families attended. The other two were state primary schools; in one of which children of middle -income families, and in the other, children of low-income families attended (Table 1).

Table 1 The participants and the sites

| Sites | Profile | Participants | Pre schooling | | Age | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------|----|-----------------|-----------|
| | | | Yes | No | Below 72 months | 72+months |
| A state school- Ankara | low-income families | 3 First grade teachers | 5 | 89 | 46 | 24 |
| A state school- Ankara | midle income families | 3 First grade teachers | 60 | - | 32 | 28 |
| A private school- Ankara | high income families | 3 First grade teachers | 45 | - | 15 | 30 |

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