



Early childhood professionals' perceptions of children's school readiness characteristics in six countries



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ABSTRACT

The opinions of early years educators and primary school teachers regarding the school readiness characteristics (SRC) that best support a child's positive transition to school differ. The aims of our study were to determine key elements of perceived SRC and to identify the priorities of pre-service and in-service early years professionals in six countries: Australia, Austria, Colombia, Germany, Nicaragua, and Slovenia. In total, 1198 early years professionals responded to a survey that investigated perceptions of child school readiness characteristics. Independence, social skills and concentration were reported to be very important. Academic precursors and physical development were reported to be the least important SRC. Findings for the total sample and specific subgroups are presented and discussed.

1. Introduction

The child who is ready for school is more likely to experience a successful transition from the predominantly family- and/or early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting-based environment, to the formal school environment (cf. Wesley & Buysse, 2003). During early childhood, the skills and dispositions that children acquire in part through engagement with others influence their school readiness by helping or impeding their preparedness and their capacity to learn. Teachers who are aware of children's strengths and abilities are better equipped to individualise their teaching in order to support children's learning and development accordingly. For instance, in Victoria, Australia, ECEC educators complete a 'Transition and Learning Development Statement' in conjunction with children, families and other professionals in order to support individual children's transitions to school (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) (2014)). This document summarises the child's learning and development, describes the child's interests, and indicates how best the child's learning can be supported, in order to support the child's transition to school.

However, which child characteristics are most important for a positive transition to school remains unclear (Niklas, 2011; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Two recent studies that investigated the perceptions of Australian and German educators identified 17

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different aspects of children's school readiness that may be important for children starting school (Niklas, Cohrssen, & Tayler, 2016; Niklas, 2011). These included social competence, independence, language skills and concentration (for a full list, please refer to the Appendix A) and align well with children's school readiness characteristics prioritized in guidelines and official documents in various countries (e.g., Euroguidance Österreich, 2014; Ministerio de la Educación Nacional, 1994; Niklas, 2011; Tansey, 2008).

In the present study, we sought to determine which of these 17 school readiness characteristics (SRC) early years (EY) professionals (i.e., pre-service and in-service EY educators and primary school teachers) in six different countries (Australia, Austria, Colombia, Germany, Nicaragua, and Slovenia) deem to be important for children's smooth transition to formal school education. Further, we were interested in similarities and differences in the opinions of female and male pre-service educators and teacher candidates (i.e., students), and in-service early childhood educators and primary school teachers with differing work experiences in this regard. Our intent is thus to contribute to international conversations regarding the nature of child school readiness and how best to support children making the important transition to school.

In this article, the term 'EY professionals' is used to refer to all individuals who are undertaking initial teacher education to work in formal ECEC settings or primary schools, or who are already teaching in either setting. Further, we will use the term 'pre-service' for all future EY professionals who have not yet completed an EY qualification. Similarly, 'in-service' refers to all individuals who have completed a teaching qualification and who are employed in ECEC settings or primary schools. Finally, we will use 'educators' for all individuals working in formal ECEC settings that precede primary school and 'teachers' for all individuals employed in schools. We are aware that different terms are used in different countries and that EY professionals from different countries also differ in regard to their own education, however this distinction assists in clarifying the comparisons we draw between the different subgroups in our sample.

1.1. School readiness

A child's transition to school is not merely a phase for the child to experience independently or with family support alone; rather it is part of a broader, national socio-political context and involves several individuals and institutions. This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and results in an eco-systemic process model of the transition to school (e.g., Niklas, Tayler, & Cohrssen, 2017, p. 122). According to this model, a successful transition to school depends on the adequate interaction of several ecosystems such as experiencing high-quality ECEC (cf. Niklas & Tayler, 2018), schools that are prepared to support the particular needs of the individual child (cf. Moss, 2012), a favourable home learning environment (cf. Niklas & Schneider, 2013, 2017), as well as adequate cognitive and behavioural child competencies. Positive collaboration and communication between parents, ECEC educators, and school teachers are clearly important as well (Cohrssen & Niklas, 2016).

Consequently, school readiness should be seen as a broad construct that includes (1) child characteristics, (2) characteristics of the child's family, (3) aspects of the ECEC setting attended by the child such as the educational program and learning environment, and (4) aspects of the school such as curriculum and teacher characteristics as well as (5) positive interactions between these ecosystems (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2017). School readiness is thus a complex construct with varying definitions across cultures and times (cf. Niklas et al., 2017; Quirk, Grimm, Furlong, Nylund-Gibson, & Swami, 2016). The conceptualisations of the last century range from a maturationist view focusing on children's innate abilities and physical development, to social constructivist, environmental, cognitive and interactionist views that are now more common (see also Dockett & Perry, 2002).

While our approach aligns with an interactionist view and we believe that 'school readiness' should be regarded as a complex and comprehensive concept, we recognize that children's competencies are important in the determination of school readiness and it is on these competencies that we focus in this instance. The school-ready child is frequently the focus of research as child characteristics may be readily assessed and provide information that is directly relevant to daily classroom activities and learning (Quirk et al., 2016). There is still no consensus on a configuration of school readiness elements and dimensions (e.g., Snow, 2006). However, recent international literature identifies specific factors such as general cognitive skills, self-regulatory skills such as attention and motivation, and child behaviour as main characteristics of children's school readiness (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2013).

In particular, cognitive competencies, and especially specific precursors such as vocabulary, letter and number knowledge, counting abilities and phonological awareness are important SRC, given that they are the best predictors of an individual's later academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007; LaParo & Pianta, 2000; Vidmar, Niklas, Schneider, & Hasselhorn, 2017). In practice, however, many education professionals in early childhood and primary schools tend to focus predominantly on a child's social-emotional competencies and self-help skills (Cuskelly & Detering, 2003; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003). Differing views on school readiness characteristics matter as they have implications for specific achievements of children that are given priority (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005).

1.2. How do early years professionals prioritise children's school readiness characteristics?

As EY educators and school teachers play an important role during children's transition to school, their opinions about relevant and less relevant aspects of children's school readiness matter. Internationally, EY professionals prioritize social skills as a key component of children's school readiness (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Kammermeyer, 2000; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, & Karoly, 2008; Niklas, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Schmiedeler, 2011; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Other aspects of school readiness often deemed to be important language skills, ability to concentrate, confidence, independence and motivation.

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