

**An Investigation of School Readiness
– A Year One Perspective**

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Abstract

In England school readiness, has been a frequent topic of debate since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988. Although official guidance from the Government dictates that children must begin formal schooling on the closest set day to their 5th birthday (those set days being 31st December 31st March and 31st August), most children start Reception in the September after they turn 4. These admission guidelines however, get somewhat more complicated when considering summer-born children, those born between 1st April and 31st August. With parents of those children being able to choose whether to introduce their child into Reception or Year 1. This practitioner research aims to investigate school-readiness from the perspective of a small year 1 class in the South of England. In particular, it focuses on the definition of school readiness, the age that children should begin school, and the various strategies used to support children when beginning school, and during transitions between key stages. I will also consider summer-born children, and whether the information is or should be applicable to this specific group of children. Research data was collected via observations, questionnaires, interviews, and scrutiny of children’s work and behaviour. The key findings from my research and study of relevant literature suggests that children do not appear to have lower attainment based on the age they begin school. However, it did show that a lack of clear communication between school and parents, and a lack of clarity over the definition of readiness for school, could be shown to negatively impact on a child’s experience of starting school.

Introduction

“What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in pursuit of the child.” George Bernard Shaw

Are you ready?

According to the ‘Are You Ready? – Good Practice in School Readiness’ report (Ofsted, 2014), there is no clearly defined national definition of school readiness. Instead its precise characteristics are interpreted differently by various interested parties. The Government, in its Early Years Framework (Department for Education, 2017a), identifies communication and language, physical development, and personal and social development as being key identifiers of a child’s readiness for school. In a journal for Health Visitors, (Peckham, 2017) Peckham defines school readiness instead as a holistic (Gaynor, 2015) style judgement, which recognises children’s diversity, wide-ranging abilities and development of the skills required for them to thrive in a classroom environment. Additionally, a survey by PACE (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2013) found that the majority of parents when questioned about school readiness, defined it as children being emotionally prepared, able to cope with separation, independent, and with a growing curiosity about the world. Alternately, a report by Tickell (Tickell, 2011) on behalf of the Department of Education, preferred to use the term ‘school unreadiness’ to refer to the characteristics and behaviours which demonstrated that a child was not yet ready for formal schooling. However, a common shared definition amongst many of these varied stakeholders, is that readiness is formed of many aspects. A child’s cognitive ability, physical development, emotional readiness and resilience, all contribute to a child’s overall readiness for school (Logue, 2016). The United Nations World Fit for Children (UNICEF, 2002) highlights this in their mission statement, identifying that what children need in order to be ready for

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school is: a nurturing, safe environment; physical health; mental alertness; social skills; and the ability to learn.

A global issue

International reports now show that the debate over school readiness is one of the most pressing issues in education globally (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009; OECD, 2006). According to global data gathered in 2013, the majority of countries, 88%, have a school starting age of 6 or above (World Bank, 2013), in comparison to the UK Government's recommended starting age of 4. These findings are also mirrored when looking exclusively at European data, where 84% of children start school at the age of 6 or later. However, globally the most common and accepted school starting age is 6 (Bertram and Pascal, 2002; O'Donnell et al, 2002). Prais (1997) found that this later school start age proved beneficial for children's attainment, as children had more patience and confidence to try new skills. Children's attainment was also less variable, as the age difference between those in the class was less obvious, meaning less differentiation was required by teachers.

Rationale for this area of research

My initial reason for choosing school readiness as an area of research, was primarily, a professional interest as an Early Years Specialist. I was particularly interested in better understanding how best to prepare children for beginning their school lives. As I hope to work in Reception or Year 1, school readiness and its implications for children's future schooling is important to me. When first considering my research question I was surprised to see such heated and impassioned debate around school readiness and its implications for children. My literature research also identified a clear dissonance surrounding the most appropriate age for children to begin formal schooling. Therefore, within this research project I hope to identify, what school readiness means and when it should begin, and perhaps most importantly, how we can best support children through this transitional stage

School context

My research was carried out in a small single form, independent school in the South West of England. The school has its own Nursery on site, and a high proportion of those children transition across to the school's Reception class. The professionals interviewed as part of my research had been working in the Early Years Foundation Stage or Key Stage 1 for at least 5 years, and had first-hand experience in supporting children's transition into school. 50 teachers working in Early Years and Key Stage 1 completed online questionnaires, alongside 10 parents of Year 1 children.

Literature Review

This literature review serves to analyse current and historical literature in relation to school readiness: Focussing on the definition of school readiness, the age at which children begin school, and the variety of transitional approaches used to support children as they begin their academic lives.

What is school readiness?

School readiness is, in its simplest form, the age at which children should begin school, and their preparedness for it (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012). However, the definition of what readiness looks like for young children is not as clearly defined (Besford, 2017). A Government report into the Foundation Years (Field, 2010) identified school readiness as being primarily parent-led. For children up to the age of 5, the home environment, family background and parental influences have the most impact on the available provision of learning and development opportunities. The Allen report (2011) identifies the role parents play in preparing their children for school as critical for school readiness. The report highlights in particular the Family and Schools Together intervention scheme (Early Foundation Intervention (revised) (2017) which seeks to support parents and families in boosting children's self-esteem, emotional resilience and ability to perform basic care needs, which it describes as readiness for school. The report also suggests that providing children with a strong sense of

community and a feeling of belonging in the home helps prepare them for the social and emotional requirements of school life (Department for Education, 2017b). Desforges (2003) also identifies the importance of parents providing their children with a nurturing and stimulating home environment. However, a UNICEF (2012) report into school readiness and transitioning suggests that parents tend to prioritise cognitive and linguistic experiences over social and emotional ones, when preparing their children for starting school. This, according to the same piece of research, could be because parents do not receive adequate communication from schools, about how best to prepare their children.

A report by Tickell (2011) into the Early Years Foundation Stage, found that the development of personal, social and emotional skills, communication and language and physical development were the focus for children being ready for school. It goes on to highlight the importance of the EYFS when preparing children for starting school and identifies this period of a child's life as being the biggest determiner for their future academic success. The 'Are You Ready' report by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) (2014) argues that the primary purpose of early years education is to provide children with the tools they require for their future academic success. Such as the ability to complete tasks independently, the resilience to try again when things go wrong, and the chance to develop social skills. The report also states that strong early years provision can help counter-act any socio-economic issues in a child's background. Burger (2010), and Dockett and Perry (2013) also observe the importance of early years education in providing children with the tools needed to begin school successfully, highlighting the importance of a strong early years background when considering children's future academic success. Georgeson and Payler (2013) however, claim that a focus on early years provision as a way of readying children for school can over-simplify the process. This in turn can then negatively affect the individual needs each child has in order for them to become 'school ready'.

Suggate (2009) found that children who begin learning too early, can in fact be negatively impacted later in their school lives. In particular he identifies that children who begin reading too early, can suffer from disengagement in reading later in their school lives. Magaluzzi (1993) therefore, suggests that school readiness should in fact be child-led, with children controlling for themselves when they are ready to learn individual skills. Whilst this piece of literature is slightly dated, it is a principle which underpins the Montessori approach to learning. Children taught using the Montessori (Salkind, 2008) methods were observed as self-identifying when they were ready to learn, and accessing resources accordingly. This, it could be argued, negates the need for any academic debate on school readiness at all, instead allowing children themselves to determine when they are ready for school. However, there is a danger that children who struggle with self-regulation, may never choose to progress themselves, or may choose to wait for their friends rather than move themselves on at an appropriate pace.

When are children ready for school?

According to current educational policy in England (Department for Education, 2018), children can begin schooling in the September after their 4th birthday. However, school is not compulsory until they reach the closest prescribed day (31st December, 31st March, 31st August) following their 5th birthday.

Nick Gibb (2015), in an open letter to parents and schools, admitted that the current system is flawed, and does not currently meet the interests of summer-born children. Parents and schools, under the current guidelines are struggling to reach a shared opinion on whether deferring school entry for children born in the summer months, meets their needs appropriately. This can have a big impact on those children born later in the year, with research by Bierman et al (2008) showing that, where children start school too early, comparisons are often made within academic cohorts against older peers within the same class, negatively affects their social and emotional development.

Sharp (2002), looks at the UK school starting age within the context of its European counterparts. She claims that the current Early Years Framework, is sufficient for preparing children for school. Therefore, she argues there is no purpose in making the starting age later, or by adapting it for summer-born children. Whitebread and Bingham (2014) also claim that by the time a child enters Reception class, they already have a sufficient amount of life experience, and a developing bank of knowledge which is adequate for beginning school at the age of 5. Conversely, Tickell (2011), in research commissioned by the Government, found that children who started school before they were ready, had higher incidences of causing classroom disruption. They were also less engaged in their own learning, a disconnection, which she claims may continue to affect them for the rest of their academic lives. Instead, she proposes a much later school age, arguing that most children are not emotionally or academically mature enough by the time they enter Reception or Year One.

House (2013), an active campaigner for increasing the school start age, highlights that 84% of school start ages globally, are later than that of the UK. He argues that when the UK school starting age was decided, the economic landscape was very different. During the Victorian period children were considered to be safer in school, than on the streets or in the work place. He states that as society has progressed the legislation regarding the school start age should also have developed. He instead proposes that children should be free to learn and develop through play outside of the classroom environment. Suggesting that children should only progress to more formal and structured teaching at the age of 7. Equally there are those who believe that the school starting age should be flexible, with parents and teachers deciding in partnership, when a child is ready to join reception. Ofsted (2014) identified that in fact, only half of all children are ready to begin learning in a structured environment, at the age of 5. The research also found a strong correlation between children's social and economic backgrounds and their readiness for school. It therefore suggested that decisions on school readiness would be best decided through discussion between the Early Years practitioner, parents and school. Brooks and Murray (2016) agreed that a decision on school readiness should be made based after discussion between the interested parties. It suggests that there is a clear dissonance between what is expected of children beginning school, and the child's own needs and interests. They also suggest that children come to school with a wealth of experiences and backgrounds for example they could be summer-born or have older siblings. All children under the current system, are however, expected to meet the same Early Years Goals to demonstrate readiness for school. Brooks and Murray go on to suggest that children are not currently allowed to develop naturally and at an appropriate pace for them. Research which looked at independent schools specifically (DeLuca and Hughes, 2014), also found that there was more emphasis and scope to allow for children to develop at their own pace; with children's learning becoming more formal and independent at varying rates. This type of learning is more readily-supported in smaller independent classrooms with a higher teacher to child ratio.

What are the current strategies for supporting children during their transition to school?

Schore (2001), identifies studies, which show that when a familiar adult accompanies a child to school, the child is more relaxed and able to settle in the new environment. The results found that children who had an adult to return to at times of low confidence, were more comfortable taking risks. The study also found that this was true of children who had older siblings in the school. A familiarisation with the staff and classroom layout improved children's confidence and willingness to try new things.

However, Brooker (2002) raises concerns over how easy it would be to provide all children with the same exposure to the classroom, prior to beginning school. She suggests that children with older siblings in the same school, or those transitioning from on-site nurseries, will already have had more experience of the new environment. Pre-start visits, she claims, will not be enough to balance the disparity between the two groups of children.

Balaban (2006) suggests that securing a strong link between home and school is one way of supporting children's transition to reception. She claims that these types of pre-star visit help secure a relationship between child and teacher whilst in an environment where the child feels safe. It also provides opportunity for the teacher to identify and share in the child's interests, and identifies any needs which may need to be supported in the classroom. This bond between teacher and child can also shape a child's future opinion of the education process. However, this type of visit may not always be appropriate (Johnston and Memim, 1994) due to children's socio-economic backgrounds, cultural beliefs or parental wishes. It may, therefore, be more appropriate to schedule such meetings in mutually agreed locations, such as a local soft-play or community centre. They also suggest that stay and play sessions, where parents and children visit the school, are perhaps the most appropriate way of creating a parent-teacher-child relationship. Langenkamp (2013) discusses the importance of parent involvement when supporting children's transitions to school. Children who have access to fewer resources at home, it suggests, are less ready for school as a result. Emphasis is therefore placed on preparing children for school life using books, roleplay and parent-child discussions. However, this does not necessarily mean that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds will be unable to thrive. Early years provision, stable family life, and good quality teaching can supplement children during the transition process. It is also important, when in the home environment, that children are able to practise experiences which may be replicated in school (Thorne, 2005). For example, replicating eating meals at the dining table, can be a good rehearsal for eating in a school dining room, which may be an unnerving and unfamiliar aspect of school life (Fleer, 2010).

Methodology and Ethics

Within this section, I will explain the methods of data collection which were used to compile this research project. I will consider the value of, and issues surrounding, each data collection type, and discuss them using a range of literature. As my research involves me working with, and analysing information provided by children, I will also need to very carefully consider ethics when conducting and presenting my research.

When selecting my methodology, I decided that action research, specifically practitioner research was the most appropriate. Cohen and Manion (1994) describe action research as that which is best suited to a context which requires inside knowledge about a problem in a specific situation. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) add to this, identifying that practitioner research is a researcher using their practice to shape their research design. As a trainee teacher, and early years specialist, I have direct experience and knowledge of the issues surrounding school readiness. This methodology was, therefore, the most appropriate. Martin (1999) identifies the importance of being able to see data in a wider context, reminding us that teachers do not practise in isolation, but as part of a wider community of parents, teachers, children and the local community. Hart (1998) continues, it is important also to avoid over-generalisation when analysing data. I have considered this when presenting my results, ensuring that my data is presented without bias. As practitioner research requires collecting data within my working environment, from other teaching professionals, I need to be mindful of the participants' own values and beliefs (Bell, 2014) to ensure there is no bias when collecting information, as this could make potential results inconclusive or unreliable. Participants may choose to answer questions in a way which shows themselves or the school in the best light, I therefore tried to avoid using questions where a potential bias could arise.

Christensen and Prout (2002) continue by reminding us that it is important not to see a child as an object through which to gather data, but to experience the information they are sharing, as they see it. I therefore allowed the children the opportunity to express their opinions through drawing, conversation and role-play, with as little intervention as possible, meeting the UN Rights of the Child (1989), which states children should have the freedom to express themselves in whichever format they choose. This is defined by Clark and Moss (2011) as a mosaic approach to data collection, which

attempts to build up a picture of a child's insight into a subject using a variety of sources and methods of data retrieval. Whilst this allows children more freedom for discussion it can be argued that this method of data collection is less scientific and therefore less reliable, making generalisations become more difficult. Holmes (1998) discusses the potential for young children to become distracted and disengaged during the interview process, I therefore ensured that when gathering data, I kept the questions brief and open-ended, allowing the children to dictate the time spent answering and stopping when the children became distracted and unengaged.

The research method I chose for this research was qualitative, as the purpose of my data collection was to generate theories regarding school readiness, rather than trying to find solutions (Coles and McGrath, 2010). According to Pugsley (Pugsley, 2008), research should be concerned with understanding and not just observing the data gathered. Using qualitative data collection methods, allowed me to explore and develop a deep understanding of school readiness from a variety of perspectives, rather than looking at a selection of numbers without context. My primary sources of data collection were interviews conducted with children, parents and teachers. As I was conducting my research in a small, independent school, I was able to use all 8 of the children in my class to conduct my research. When conducting the interviews with children I decided to do these 1:1, in an unstructured fashion, allowing the children to lead discussions. I selected 2 participants from my subject school for interview, choosing class teachers from Reception and Year One, in order to compare and contrast their opinions, again, these interviews were carried out 1:1, but on a more structured basis. I also conducted an online questionnaire which allowed 50 practitioners across EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) and KS1 (the legal term for the two years of schooling in maintained schools in England and Wales normally known as Year 1 and Year 2, when pupils are aged between 5 and 7) to participate in a series of questions online. Additionally, 10 parent contributors also completed an online questionnaire. Pugsley (2008) emphasises the importance of selecting the correct questions for both interviews and questionnaires in order to obtain the most relevant information for one's research project. Therefore, I needed to consider what information I wanted to obtain from my interviews and questionnaires, using that to shape the questions I asked, whilst avoiding bias. For example, by asking participants what they might suggest to the school in order to aid children's transitions, rather than asking them to unpick the transitional support already available.

Forsey (2012) also remarks that interviews allow participants to contribute their meaning, perceptions and understanding of a subject without restraint. As the topic of school readiness is one which is largely subjective, this will be an important factor in my collection of data. However, I do need to be mindful of participants, particularly children, wanting to provide the 'right' answers, I therefore attempted to make my questions as broad and open-ended as possible. One potential area of difficulty when conducting interviews, according to Tangard (2007,) is that responses may vary depending on the rapport built between the researcher and the participants. I therefore used anonymous questionnaires from multiple participants, and carried out observations to supplement the information gathered from my interviews.

When compiling my questionnaires, I ensured I kept the number of questions short, in order to engage as many participants as possible. I also tried to keep the questions precise, in order to pinpoint the exact information I was hoping to retrieve during the research. Thomas (2013) suggests however, to be aware of prestige bias, and warns that people may censor their answers to appear more intelligent, ethical, kind and so on. I therefore need to be mindful of this phenomenon, when interpreting my data. Pantell and Lewis (1987) in some dated, but seminal research found that there was, generally speaking a position bias response to most questionnaires, this type of response means that participants deliberately refuse to pick either extreme of a set of data. I therefore adapted my questions to ensure each answer required a written response rather than multiple choice. Curtis et al (2013), discuss the benefits of the qualitative data retrieved from open-ended questionnaires,

remarking that this allows participants to express their opinion on a subject without restraint. Questionnaires they state can also lead researchers towards potential follow-up interview questions.

The final method of data collection I chose to use for my research project was the observation of the children in my class. I observed the children during lessons, looking at how they worked, and behaviours and manners which were displayed in between lessons. This type of data collection, Punch and Oancea (2014) suggests, allows for open-ended and natural responses. Not only will this ensure that children are able to participate in the study with minimal disruption, but it also minimises the potential for bias, as children will be going about their normal behaviours. An open-ended observation such as this, Adler and Adler (1994) suggest, could highlight potential areas of exploration, and can help shape further research questions. However, Punch and Oancea (2014) further adds, that prolonged integration into a group is required in order to ascertain true behaviours and habits. This could have affected the validity of some of the data retrieved, as I only had a short period of time in which to compile observations. However, using a variety of data methods alongside observation **was** to minimise the potential for generalisations to be made, caused by this shortened observation period. Cohen et al (2007), also point out a potential flaw when using observational data, remarking that it can be difficult to arrange and plan for unobstructed behaviours. However, as my observations were of the children in general, and not at a pre-determined time, there was no need to pre-arrange or plan observational time.

As I am using a combination of interviews, observations and questionnaires, my research will form a triangulation of data, through which I can demonstrate validity and reliability of information and results. Flick et al (2004) raise the issue of triangulation data increasing the work-load of the researcher causing it to be difficult to secure sufficient data. However, as I was researching for a small-scale study, I was able to retrieve all of the data I was looking for despite using multiple methods of collection.

As my research involved working with very young children in year 1, I had to be mindful of some of the ethical concerns around working with this age group. Shemmings (2000) and Thomas (2000) query whether such young children are able to follow to the processes involved in gathering research data. When interviewing the children in my class I ensured that my questions were open-ended, and allowed the conversations to be child-led, removing the formality surrounding the interview process.

Aubrey et al (2000) highlight the difficulty in being able to fully inform such young children about the research process, allowing them to understand and give consent. I chose therefore to seek opt-out consent from parents or guardians (Department of Health, 1989), before offering the children an opportunity to talk about school. I chose opt-out consent in order to make the process as simple and convenient as possible for the participants. It also meant participants would withdraw if unhappy rather than forget to consent. Cohen et al (2014) remind us that it is important that contributors do not feel pressured to participate in the research, and are made aware of their right to withdraw from the study. I therefore ensured that all participants, or their parents and guardians, were able to refuse participation via an opt-out consent form, I also provide them with clear instructions on how to withdraw information. As per the BERA guidelines (2012), I have adhered to strict ethical guidelines regarding the storing of the data collected for this research project. All information collected was stored on an encrypted drive, and will be destroyed upon completion of this research. All participants were made aware of their right to have information removed from the study, and were provided with a second contact through which consent could have been removed. In addition, I have ensured anonymity by removing any identifiable information about the school, and contributors to this research project.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Definition of School Readiness

Interviews were conducted with a selection of teachers working in both the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, with questions focussed around the definition of school readiness, and what professionals would expect from a child who was 'school ready'. The data collected suggests overwhelmingly that education practitioners consider demonstration of independence, social, emotional and physical development and the ability to perform basic self-care, as the highest determiners for demonstrating school readiness in children. Key Stage 1 teachers specifically, mentioned the importance of children being able to perform basic tasks such as dressing, using the toilet, or putting on their coat independently. The Allen report (2003) identifies the importance of parents preparing their children for school, including the importance of teaching children emotional and social skills, alongside basic care needs such as dressing and recognising when they need the toilet. Something which is supported by the Early Intervention Foundation Scheme (2017) and their Family and Schools Together scheme, which aims to support parents in teaching children these skills.

When observing the children in my class, I found that 3 quarters of the class found it difficult to get ready for PE independently. The main functions the children in my class struggled with included doing up their top buttons, identifying the correct shoes, putting on tights and fastening ties. I also found that the summer-born children, in particular, seemed to find these skills challenging, whilst the only child in my class with older siblings was also the most efficient at getting changed. A UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) report (2012) which looked into readiness found that parents tended to favour teaching their children cognitive skills rather than social and personal care skills. This was something which appeared to be demonstrated in my research. However additional literature by Field (2010) suggested that parents were primary responsible for preparing their children for school, with home life and economic background having the greatest impact on children's learning, claiming that parents actually tend to focus on social skills, rather than intellectual development. Of the parents questioned, the majority said they taught their children how to count and the letters of the alphabet in preparation for school, however none mentioned teaching their children self-care skills. When observing the children in my class I found that there was no correlation between cognitive ability and children who were able to perform self-care. Children who were in my higher ability groupings were also some of the children who struggled most with getting changed, or using the bathroom. Equally the children in my class who were adept at things like dressing themselves, were also some of those who struggled academically. The UNICEF report (2012) continues by saying parents often feel like they are not given enough information about what they need to do at home in order to support their children starting school. This correlates with what parents claimed during my interviews, with most participants saying they were not sure how best to prepare their children for starting school, citing either a lack of correspondence from the school, or confusion over what is most beneficial for children to be taught before school. Questionnaire responses also confirmed this, with over 75% of participants claiming better communication between schools and parents, and information about preparing for school was needed.

In addition to the role parents play in supporting children's transition to school, my literature research found that a good Early Years education was equally important in preparing children from school. In an OFSTED report (2012) looking at school readiness, findings suggested that the primary purpose of the Early Years Foundation Stage is to equip children with the skills required to start school. In particular teaching independence, and emotional resilience, allowing children to try again when things go wrong. This matches with the responses I received from education professionals via questionnaire, all of whom suggested independence was a key factor in demonstrating school readiness. This was something which was largely demonstrated in my Year 1 subject class, with most showing independence in all aspects of school life. The only exception to this was a male child, who whilst transitioning up from the Reception class, had not attended the on-site Nursery, instead coming

straight from a home environment. When observing this child, I noticed he needed a lot of encouragement to start tasks, although he was very capable of completing them. He also needed a lot of reassurance throughout the day, including help with selecting activities for golden time, or encouraging to go out to play. Literature seeks to explain this, with several sources attempting to provide explanation for the types of behaviour witnessed during the observations. Burger (2010) and Dockett and Perry (2013) emphasise the importance an Early Years education has on equipping children with the tools needed to cope at school. As the child in question had not attended Early Years provision, it could be argued that there was not sufficient opportunity for him to become independent. However, this assumption is largely biased and as other observations demonstrated he was more than capable in other skills and areas of learning. Schore (2001) claims that unfamiliarity with a learning environment can cause children to suffer with a lack of confidence and an unwillingness to try new things. This showed a more direct correlation between literature and observation, with the child under discussion very unconfident, requiring lots of encouragement to try new things. In particular, he sought to return to familiar things when feeling uncomfortable, for example returning to playing football during a PE lesson when he became confused by the cricket skills being taught.

Age of School Readiness

Data retrieved from my questionnaire showed that there was no clear age at which parents or teachers believed children should start school. 32% believed that the current school starting age of 5 was most appropriate, whilst 34% believed it should be increased to 7 years old. However, all participants, when questioned, believed that learning should be primarily play-based until children reached 7. This was also mirrored when interviewing the children, with all but 1 child saying the biggest difference between Reception and Year 1, was that they had to learn instead of being able to have fun. Sharp (2002) and Whitebread and Bingham (2014) all concur that the Early Years Foundation stage prepares children sufficiently for beginning school at 5. They argue that by the time a child reaches 5, they already have enough life experience and knowledge to be able to progress to a more formal style of teaching and learning.

When observing the children in my subject class, I found that the majority were able to cope with sitting and working at a desk. They engaged actively with their learning and enjoyed moving from task to task, sometimes choosing to continue working during their golden time. Sharp (2002) also further adds that there is no clear benefit to adapting the current system to support summer-born children, arguing that little benefit would be seen from such adaptations, a point which is counteracted by Gibb (2015) who, in a letter to parents, schools and local authorities admitted that the current system was not working effectively in supporting summer-born children. This literature supported the observations made in the classroom, where the summer born children often appeared to struggle with concentration and emotion regulation, particularly later in the day or towards the end of the week. This same set of summer born children were also those who were most concerned about the standard of work they produced. Tending to become more upset if they made small errors and often becoming inconsolable if they felt they had not found the correct answer, despite reassurance. Bierman et al (2008) attempt to explain this behaviour, citing that children who start school too early may find comparisons being made against older peers within the same class. This, he argues, can affect children's emotional and social development, as children become self-critical and concerned about their own ability.

Whilst comparisons were not consciously made between children by the teacher, it is possible that the children themselves were making comparisons between their own work and that of their peers. Indeed, some of those children, when interviewed remarked that they often felt less capable of completing the work given to them. In particular one of the summer-born children in the class claimed that he often found work difficult because he got too tired, despite him being one of the highest

attaining children in the class. The same child often got emotional when asked to stop working in order to get ready for lunch or home time, as he was anxious to get work completed.

Tickell (2001) in research undertaken on behalf of the Government, found that children who started school before they were ready, were often the most at risk of causing disruption in the classroom. However, observations with the study class did not find this to be the case, with the youngest children also being the most compliant. Indeed, from observations in the classroom, and from interviews with the children, the child most prone to disruptive behaviour was also the child who appeared most ready to start school. The child in question had older siblings already in attendance at the school, had attended the school-based Nursery and was also the most independent and confident in class. It is worth considering, however, that as this research took place in a small, independent class this may be a generalisation which is not applicable in a wider context.

Strategies for Supporting Transition

Schore (2001) states that children who have had prior exposure to the learning environment, or who visit with a familiar adult, are more likely to feel well supported and confident during transitions. My observations found that the children who attended the school-based Nursery, or who had older siblings in the school were much more relaxed in their environment. In particular during a programming lesson, the children who attended the Nursery were confident and excited about using the Bee-Bots. Similarly, the child who had attended a different Nursery and Reception class was much more apprehensive, having not used the IT suite prior to the lesson. Data from both my questionnaires and practitioner interviews found that the most common methods of transitional support, were home or school visits. During interview, the Reception Class teacher discussed the value of visiting the child in their home environment, remarking that not only could she assess the child in their most natural state, but that she also found the parents more relaxed. In contrast, she found that that parents were much more unsettled and anxious when bringing their children in to visit the school. This, she suggested, caused the children to become equally anxious in some instances, making it difficult to assess their readiness for school. However, 100% of parent questionnaires stated that they found stay and play visits the most helpful thing that their school did to aid transitions.

Langenkamp (2013) emphasises the importance of parents supporting the transition from home to school. Amongst the suggestions made, Langenkamp recommends preparing children through books, roleplay and parent-child conversation. However, the majority of parents, when interviewed, admitted that they saw the school and class teacher as primarily responsible for supporting their child's transition to school. Although many also remarked that they felt they were not provided with sufficient advice or suggestions on how they could help support this process. Thorne (2005) discusses the importance of replicating situations which children may find difficult when first beginning school, for example eating in front of large groups in a school hall. It goes on to suggest that by taking children to eat publicly in restaurants or similar busy places, and by helping them to use things like a lunch-box, they are minimising potential anxiety later on. During my interviews with practitioners, all commented that children found lunch and break time particularly difficult. They discussed the difficulties children had with self-regulation when eating their lunch, children in some circumstances also found eating in front of other people difficult, becoming anxious and refusing to eat. The majority of children, during my observation, also appeared to find it difficult to open their own lunchboxes, drinks bottles and food packets, increasing the workload for staff on lunchtime duty.

Conclusion

Summary

My research project has demonstrated that school readiness is, and will continue to be a fiercely debated topic globally. School readiness is a greatly subjective topic, and as such it has been difficult to consider the topic without an element of bias from any of the literature or participant involvement.

Beginning school is one of the most important, and difficult stages of any child and parent's lives. Therefore, it is right that we continue to discuss and research ways in which to make the process as smooth and as positive as possible.

Recommendations

The definition of school readiness continues to be difficult to determine, however the evidence collated suggests that preparing for it is something which should be done collectively, with Early Years practitioners, parents and teachers all equally important in helping children become school ready. What has become clear during the course of this research, is the disparity between what teachers define as school ready, and what parents perceive school readiness to be. However more communication needs to take place between parents and their chosen school, with guidelines on skills children need in order to be school ready.

Evidence collated during this research suggests that there is largely a split across the ages when considering the most appropriate for children to begin school. However, all parties agree that there needs to be an increase in play-based learning for young children. There is also reason to suggest the current system is not supporting children born in the summer months appropriately when starting school, which could go on to affect their confidence and emotional development as they continue their education. Therefore, more consideration needs to be given when preparing this particular group of children.

A multi-layered approach to transitional support appears to be the most effective when children start school. Whilst there is some disagreement between parents and teachers about the most appropriate way of developing a strong parent-teacher-child connection, both parties are in agreement over its importance. Additionally, parents need more support and advice on areas that may be difficult for children starting school. This will allow them opportunity to adequately support and prepare their children in those areas.

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