Children's School Readiness Based on Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Early primary school entrance is something to be concerned about since it serves as a period, allowing to lay foundation for education which will contribute to children's future academic life. It is not an easy period for children due to several school demands and expectations which should be fulfilled by children. To deal with this, children's school readiness to attend their primary school is required. This qualitative research seeks to find out factors influencing children's readiness to attend a primary school. The subjects of the research involved teachers and parents of children who planned to apply for admission into primary schools. The research results indicate that both teachers and parents of children shared the same perceptions regarding factors influencing the school readiness that are cognitive and noncognitive factors. The former which involve reading, writing, and calculating skills are regarded significant since such skills are used as admission prerequisites for primary level in certain schools. Similarly, the latter are supposed to be important since they support children to successfully adjust to their primary school.

INTRODUCTION

Entering school starting age is exhilarating not only for children, but also for their parents. Parents have positive expectations when their children enter the school starting age and believe that school will contribute to better change in their future. Therefore, they formulate long-term plans, from types of school to financial preparedness, long before to ensure that children get the best education. However, regardless such matter, the fundamental thing needed by children when entering school is school readiness.

School readiness, which indicates readiness of the individual child to enter school, is a condition in which a child is ready to engage in learning experiences at school. It is, however, different from readiness for learning. The readiness for learning is thought of as the level of development at which an individual is ready to undertake the learning of specific materials (Kagan, 1990). School readiness also refers to maturation of children's nervous system allowing them to develop various skills based on received stimuli (Janus, et.al, 2007). Children have been ready to learn when born (Janus et.al, 2007), while their school readiness is associated with acquisition of specific skills needed for success in the school environment (Kagan, 1992), a concept which focuses on children's skills to meet school demands (Janus et al., 2007), such acts as sitting quietly and responding to instructions (Kagan, 1992 ; Doherty, 1997), working together, listening to teacher, and benefiting from educational activities provided by the school (Janus et al., 2007 ; Doherty, 2007). The nature of school readiness, however, more importantly refers to children's skills required to meet cognitive, physical, and social demands when a child enters school (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006 ; Pianta, Cox & Snow 2007 ; Janus & Gaskin, 2013). In addition, it covers a broader concept related to minimum level of child's development to give response to school's demands through his cognitive, social, and emotional qualities (Lemelin et al., 2007).

Specifically, school readiness falls into several domains including child's physical health and well-being, social competence and emotional maturity, approaches to learning, language and cognitive development, and communication skills (Kagan, 1992 ; Doherty, 2007). The other opinion stated that these domains include 1) physical health and well-being which refers to children's physical preparedness for the school day, physical independence, and fine and gross motor skills, 2) social competence which covers such areas as all social competences, responsibility and respect, approaches to learning, and readiness explore new things, 3) emotional maturity which covers prosocial behavior, cooperative behavior, anxious behavior and fear, aggression, as well as inattention and hyperactivity, 4) language and cognitive development which refers to basic literacy skills, interest and memory, more complex literacy, and basic numeracy skills, and 5) communication skills and general knowledge. All of the domains are required by children to be able to get ready to enter school and to learn at school (Janus & Offod, 2000). Children's school readiness has been conceptualized as the skills and knowledge children need when they enter school in order to learn effectively in the school environment (Janus, 2007).

Results of a research indicate that children who are ready for school are equipped by such positive characteristics as self confidence, feeling of school comfort in spite of the absence of parents or a babysitter, curiosity about world, more intentions to study, and strong social skills to interact with other children and adults (PACEY, 2013). Also, they are more likely to experience success throughout their lives by completing high school, finding employment, and making positive contributions to society as productive citizens (Doherty, 1997). On contrary, Children who are not ready at school entry are more likely to repeat a grade, to require special education services, and leave school prior to graduation (Doherty, 1997). Moreover, they tend to find difficulties in school, such as problems dealing with behavior and social skills (NICHD, 1999 ; Connell & Prinz, 2002).

Several factors influencing children's school readiness include external and internal factors. The former are sourced from outside of individual self, while the latter from inside. The external factors are frequently associated with ecological concepts which involve influence of family, community, school, service on children's school readiness (Brofenbrenner, 1999 ; KIDS COUNT, 2005). Specifically, the influence of such external factors includes ready families, ready communities, ready services and ready early learning settings and schools. Ready families imply that family environment should be able to provide learning experiences for children, as well as to give opportunity for child's growth and development. Ready communities require the availability of resources and community's support for family with little children. Ready services provide qualified, easy-to-access, and easy-to-achieve programs which have been proved to effectively influence child's development and school. Ready early learning settings and schools consist of important aspects of preschool and school programs which exert an influence on child's development and success at school (Kagan & Rigby, 2003 ; Rhode Island Kids Count, 2005). All of the external factors contribute to the emergence of children's school readiness. However, except family factor, such external factors are mostly related to government's responsibility and policy, making them difficult to change or intervene. Nowadays, demands of school readiness emphasize more on internal factors due to more possibilities to intervene.

Research stated that parents consider the main characteristics of children's school readiness including the ability to understand and to follow instructions, as well as to interact with teachers. On the contrary, teachers believe that manipulative skills and self-control are more important and teachers do not take the importance of numeracy & literacy skills into account (Zhang, Sun & Gai, 2008). Parents, on the other hand, define school readiness in terms of academic abilities, such as numeracy or alphabetical abilities (United States Department of Education, 1993). In fact, parents often encourage academic learning and believe that literacy and numeracy skills are of significance in preparing children for school (Peters, 2002). Teachers generally describe readiness in relation to behavior and capability of following instructions. Parents are more likely to regard academic-oriented skills than teachers (Hains et al., 1989), which are emphasize more on social domains (Kaufman, 2009).

The government of Indonesia has established a policy on age requirement of six years old for primary school entrance. In case of insufficient school capacity, a school may hold an entrance examination based on age criteria or others instead of academic selection criteria (The Decision of Minister of Education, 2002). The primary school entrance also does not require results of reading, writing, and calculating tests, or other forms of tests (The Government Regulation, 2010). However, in practices, due to tight competition among favorite schools in urban areas, to enter a school, children are required to do a series of tests involving cognitive and noncognitive abilities. Cognitive ability tests often include reading, writing, and calculating skills, whereas in fact this contradicts the government's policy. Although cognitive ability tests belong to one of series of primary school entrance exams, they exert an influence on teachers' and parents' perspectives in preparing students' school readiness.

In reference to previous research results as well as the present condition of education in Indonesia, the study is intended to find out internal factors influencing children's school readiness.

METHODS

This research uses qualitative method with phenomenology approach.. Qualitative method was employed in the present study. Qualitative research is defined as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is a variant of qualitative research aiming to study the nature of human events as they are immediately experienced within their real-world context (Yin, 2011). Phenomenology concerned with the study of human experience by focusing on the description, perception, and explanation of phenomena (Spiegelberg, 1982; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This study examines factors that influences children's school readiness based on teachers' and parents' perceptions

In phenomenology, sampling is described as an ongoing form of sampling (Cohen et al, 2000). Cohen et al (2000) further explained this description describes "two-tier system" for selecting informants involves both a priori and ongoing sampling decisions—following initial selection of a large group of participants to interview, the researcher selects a smaller group to follow up based on themes they raised. Following this opinion, informants in this study consisted of four preschool teachers and four children's parents who planned to apply for admission into primary schools.

Data were collected using intensive and in-depth interviews by posing open-ended questions to allow informants the freedom to talk about what they perceive as important without researcher's attempts to maintain control of its direction (Moustakas, 1994). Next, data collection can be discontinued when categories or themes have been met and new data have no longer triggered new ideas or revealed new characteristics (Charmaz, 2006 ; Creswell, 2007). Data were then analyzed using six steps of data analysis: organizing and preparing the data for analysis, reading through all the data, conducting analysis based on the specific theoretical approach and method, generating a description of the setting or people

and identifying themes from the coding, representing the data within a research report, and interpreting the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2007).

Afterwards, data were validated using triangulation. Triangulation is an analytic technique, used during fieldwork as well as later during formal analysis, to corroborate a finding with evidence from two or more different sources (Yin, 2011). Results of interviews were compared to the results of observation and related documents through direct observation on attitudes of school readiness shown by children when they are at school. In addition, results of interviews were compared to such documents related to children's school readiness as a report card and teachers' and parents' notes.

RESULT

School readiness falls into several domains including child's physical health and well-being, social competence and emotional maturity, approaches to learning, language and cognitive development, and communication skills (Doherty, 1997; Kagan, 1992). Similarly, Janus & Offord (2000) mention five domains of school readiness, which include domain of physical health and well-being; domain of social competence; domain of emotional maturity; domain of language and cognitive development; and domain of communication skills and general knowledge.

Such explanation outlines that school readiness is categorized into cognitive and noncognitive domains. The category was used to determine the themes of the research pertaining to factors influencing children's school readiness.

The first theme, cognitive factors influencing children's school readiness, involve skills of reading, writing and calculating. These three basic sets of skills have an important role in supporting children's school readiness since such skills are used as admission prerequisites for primary level in certain schools. While not all primary schools require such skills, most of the most favorite primary schools demand children to have such skills prior to their entry.

For teachers, cognitive factors are important factors influencing children's school readiness because such skills are needed by children when entering primary school.

> *To attend primary schools, especially the favorite ones, there will be tests of reading, writing and calculating. If a child is not equipped with such skills, how can he do the tests?(Int-Cog/1.1.01).*

Parents also shared the same assumption that cognitive factors exert an influence on children's school readiness.

> *Children who are ready to attend school are children who can read, write and calculate ... if a child does not have the abilities, then he will not be ready to attend primary school (Int-Cog/2.1.01).*

This triggers parents to ask teachers to implement learning of reading, writing, and calculating at school.

> *We have teachers teach our children to read, write and calculate so they will be ready to attend a primary school (Int-Cog/2.2.01).*

The parents' intention was followed up by teachers due to their same perceptions related to the importance of cognitive factors in children's school readiness.

> *We teach reading, writing, and calculating skills to children to equip them with school readiness (Int-Cog/1.2.02).*

The second theme, noncognitive factors influencing children's school readiness, include social and emotional skills of children. Such abilities help maintain children's school readiness and support the success of children's adaptation and adjustment at school.

Teachers assumed that the most important social skill that supports children's school readiness is their skill to socialize with the school environment. This ability can be seen through the interaction of children with peers and teachers at school.

> *The most important thing in children's social relationship is that they can interact with their peers, get along with their friends, and do not fight each other (Int-NonCog/1.3.01).*

Parents had the same perception that the significant supporting factor of children's school readiness is their interaction with peers.

> *Children should be able to get along with their friends, tolerate, and make new friends (Int-NonCog/2.3.01).*

Moreover, teachers stated that another important social skill which supports children's school readiness is that

> *Children have the courage to express their opinion, speak out their needs and desires to teachers and peers (Int-NonCog/1.4.02).*

Parents also came up with the same argument.

> *that if something (bad) happens at school, children have the courage to let teacher know, and therefore, the teacher can help them (Int-NonCog/2.4.02).*

The other non-cognitive skill which influences children's school readiness is the ability to control emotions. This ability is required by children to be able to control their own emotions when they feel distressed, angry or frustrated. This emotional control is important to minimize aggressive behaviors which harm other children, for examples, biting, punching, and kicking.

The ability to control emotions, on the word of teachers, is a support for children's school readiness, although this is more likely very individual.

> *Each child has unique characteristics, especially when they flare up emotion. This emotional flaring often appears when they are discouraged and they don't want to finish their homework (Int-NonCog/1.4.03).*

This opinion is in line with parents' opinion that the ability to control emotions is a component of school readiness that is quite difficult to achieve by children.

> *If children get upset, all of their activities stop although their homework has not been finished (Int-NonCog/2.4.03).*

Other abilities to control emotions closely related to children's school readiness, according to teachers, are self-confidence, independence, and discipline.

> *If children are requested to do their assignment and they can finish it well by themselves, and they only need a little help from teacher and peers, and finish that on time, there is a good possibility that they will not find any difficulties when entering primary school (Int-NonCog/1.4.04).*

DISCUSSION

The results of research revealed that there are two main factors influencing children's school readiness, namely cognitive factors which involve reading, writing, and calculating skills, and noncognitive factors which include socio-emotional skills. Such results are in line with Doherty's opinion (2007) stating that school readiness is of importance due to its consistent correlation with socio-emotional and academic outcomes.

Based on the results of interviews with teachers and parents, it is found that there are no different perspectives on factors influencing children's school readiness. Both teachers and parents share similar views on the factors influencing children's school readiness. Such results are different from those of previous research which pints out that teachers and parents have different perspectives in defining school readiness; teachers emphasize more on social domain, while parents on academic readiness (Kaufman, 2009). Such difference in perspectives emerges due to their understanding on gaps between government's policies and present real demands. Despite the presence of government's policies which do not permit cognitive ability tests to serve as admission tests to primary schools (The Decision of Minister of Education, 2002; The Government Regulation, 2010), a series of cognitive ability tests, particularly reading, writing, and calculating tests, is in fact administered as admission tests to favorite primary schools. Such understanding on the gaps between government's policies and demands cause teachers and parents to have similar perceptions on factors influencing children's school readiness. Fridani (2012) explains that the implementation of reading, writing, and calculating skills in preschools is not merely a representation of teachers' or parents' expectation towards children, but it is associated with competitive condition in the field of education with regards to the existing education policies.

Although it is stated in the curriculum of early childhood education in Indonesia that teachers should introduce simple reading, writing, and calculating to children, but referring to today's demands, they have to teach these skills completely to children to ensure that they have cognitive abilities and are ready to attend a primary school. Though teaching such skills is not in line with the curriculum, the phenomenon reflects the actual condition in Indonesia and other countries. Almost all pre-schools (early childhood education) are under the same pressure from primary school academic curriculum. The pressure of school system makes children ready to enter a primary school based on school academic demands (Wesley & Buysse, 2003 ; Snow, 2006 ; Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Noncognitive factors are the other factors contributing to children's school readiness, and they include social and emotional skills. Dealing with such abilities, teachers and parents also had the same opinion that children have to be socially ready and have the ability to control their emotions to be more prepared to enter school.

Children's most important social skill is children's ability to socialize with school environment, which can be observed through their interaction with peers and teachers at school. Such ability causes them to be socially accepted by their peers and teachers.

Moreover, their ability to control emotions is as important as the other abilities to support school readiness. It is regarded necessary for many children since their foundation of academic achievement in the first few years of schooling appears to be built from their social and emotional skills (Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997 ; Kaufman, Pianta & Cox 2000). A number of researches also reveal that emotional and social skills of children are related to their initial academic achievement (O'Neil et al, 1997).

The research results confirm that both cognitive and noncognitive factors which include reading, writing, and calculating skills, as well as social and emotional skills are interrelated and highly required for children's school readiness. Children's academic, social, and emotional skills are the main indicators of school success in the future (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the previous research that physical, social and emotional, cognitive and language competences of children have to be improved in the process of school readiness (Farran, 2011; Halle et l., 2012 ; McTurk et al, 2011 ; Morrison, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The research results conclude that both teachers and parents share similar perceptions that factors influencing school readiness include cognitive factors consisting of reading, writing, and calculating skills and noncognitive factors consisting of social skills and ability to control emotions. Cognitive factors are considered more important than noncognitive factors due to demands to master cognitive abilities to be accepted in favorite primary schools. The condition indeed contradicts the existing policies, but both teachers and parents have realized that they need to maintain children's cognitive abilities to prepare their school readiness due to the demands. Teachers and parents, however, agree that noncognitive factors are also important to support children's school readiness. Since cognitive abilities are required in primary school entrance exams, they are regarded more important. In reference to the results of the research, we suggest that policy makers realize the actual present condition, so that they can initiate a supporting policy to bridge the gaps between the existing policies and society's real demands.

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