

Teachers' Perceptions Towards Needs in Children's Readiness for Kindergarten in Kelantan

Nurizzati Othman, Kamariah Abu Bakar

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: p116973@siswa.ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

Teachers play a crucial role in guiding both parents and children through the transition to formal education, making it essential for educators to assess a child's readiness for preschool accurately. The objective of this study is to identify the level of teachers' knowledge regarding a child's readiness upon entering preschool. Besides, it also aims to identify the importance of a child's developmental domain skills in preparing for preschool. This study used a quantitative approach with a random sampling method that focuses on teachers from Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), specifically PASTI preschools. The study design used is a method of survey through delegation of questionnaires. A total of 430 teachers volunteered as respondents in this study. As additional information, the interview method was also conducted to get detailed explanations related to the items in the construct of the questionnaire. Results show that the level of awareness among teachers towards a child's readiness for preschool is moderately high. Research findings show that teachers are concerned with the child's development and mastery of basic skills before beginning school.

Keyword: Teacher Perception, Child Readiness, Kindergarten.

Introduction

Early childhood education serves as a crucial platform for the care and education of children from infancy through age six, prior to their entry into primary school (Rahmatillah et al., 2021). In Malaysia, this sector encompasses various terms such as preschool, nursery, and kindergarten, focusing on children aged six and under (The Malaysia Department of Social Welfare, 2017). These early childhood education centers are designed to nurture children's development across multiple domains, including mastering fundamental skills and fostering positive attitudes to prepare them for primary school (Ministry of Education Malaysia). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), the number of children under the age of six rose to an estimated 3.52 million in 2022. This demographic increase underscores the need for a corresponding rise in the number of nurseries and kindergartens, ensuring that effective early education is accessible to all children.

Education in the early stages is a process of children's transition from learning in the home environment to a formal school environment. This transition involves various developmental elements to help children adapt to a new and more demanding setting (Öngoren, 2021). Moreover, UNICEF (2012) underscores that the success of this transition is heavily influenced by various external factors. The experiences children have at home, including the quality of parental engagement and support, play a critical role in preparing them for school. The surrounding environment such as the community's resources and the availability of early learning opportunities also contributes to a child's readiness. Additionally, interactions with peers, caregivers, and educators help shape a child's social and emotional development, which are essential for a smooth adjustment to the school environment. Thus, a child's readiness for kindergarten is not solely determined by developmental milestones but is also shaped by a range of environmental factors.

Problem Statement

According to the Chief Statistician of Malaysia (2021), there has been an 8.1 percent increase in the number of registered nurseries, rising from 4,903 in 2019 to 5,302 in 2020. This growth reflects efforts to enhance early childhood care and education to meet the needs of the population. Despite this increase in early childhood education centers, teachers face ongoing challenges with children who may not be adequately prepared for kindergarten (Uzair & Fonny, 2019). Concerns have been raised regarding the potential negative effects of excessive use of technological gadgets on children's readiness. Sundus (2018) highlights that the use of such devices can impact children's developmental progress, particularly in communication skills, which are crucial for school readiness.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, with environmental restrictions affecting children's development of gross motor skills (Bratanoto et al., 2022). The necessity of staying indoors has limited opportunities for physical movement of children, leading to reduced gross motor stimulation and disruptions in physical growth. Similar findings from Indonesia indicate that while children may be cognitively prepared for kindergarten, they often lack optimal development in other areas, such as motor skills (Rochimah et al., 2020). Mastery of both fine and gross motor skills is essential for kindergarten readiness, as many learning approaches in early education are centered around play-based activities (Peng & Ismail, 2020).

Previous studies reveal that many children enter kindergarten lacking sufficient preparation in academic and socio-emotional skills (Curby et al., 2018; Wangke, 2021). Conversely, some argue that the focus of early education has increasingly shifted towards academic skills (Akaba et al., 2020). However, Smith and Glass (2019) demonstrate that social-emotional skills are more critical for kindergarten readiness than academic skills. These contrasting perspectives underscore the importance of both social-emotional and academic readiness for young learners. Therefore, teachers' understanding of children's readiness is crucial for delivering effective and meaningful learning experiences in kindergarten.

Research Objective

- i. Identifying the level of teacher knowledge of children's readiness to go to kindergarten.

- ii. Identify the importance of children's developmental domain skills in kindergarten readiness.

Literature Review

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasizes that the foundation of school readiness lies in a comprehensive understanding of child development and effective learning strategies. Research on school readiness often references the five core domains established by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), which include health and physical development, emotional well-being and social competence, learning approaches, communication and cognitive skills, and general knowledge (NEGP, 1991). These domains are intricately linked to each child's developmental progress, suggesting that advancements in these areas are crucial for a child's preparedness for formal schooling.

Pan et al (2019), argue that the concept of school readiness encompasses six essential elements that address the holistic needs of children, extending beyond mere academic or cognitive knowledge. It is vital for kindergarten teachers to grasp this comprehensive view of readiness as outlined by the NAEYC. An accurate assessment of a child's readiness involves evaluating various developmental domains and providing targeted interventions appropriate for the child's age (Macy et al., 2022). Such assessments are invaluable for teachers in designing effective learning experiences and supporting children's development through tailored academic activities.

Early childhood education in Malaysia is now starting to grow, reaching public awareness of the importance of early learning for children. This educational need is the main thing for parents and teachers to provide a suitable environment as a preparation for children when they enter the school world (Abd Aziz & Mohamed, 2021). A deep understanding of child development is imperative for all kindergarten teachers. Since children entering kindergarten exhibit a wide range of skills and levels of mastery due to varying backgrounds and experiences (Bassok & Latham, 2017), it is essential for teachers to enhance their knowledge of child development. Effective preparation for school involves a balanced focus not only on academic skills but also on non-academic aspects that encompass all domains of child development (Smith & Glass, 2019). This comprehensive approach ensures that educators are well-equipped to support the diverse developmental needs of their students.

Methodology

The design chosen in this study is a quantitative survey study for the purpose of analyzing teachers' knowledge of the needs in children's readiness for kindergarten. The questionnaire was distributed in the form of Google Form to collect data. The respondents of this study are among the teachers of Pusat Asuhan Tunas Islam (PASTI) in the State of Kelantan which involves 14 districts. A random sampling method is used in considering the suitability and willingness of the respondents. The sample size was determined to meet the minimum number set in the table of Krejcie & Morgan (1970), consisting of female (N = 430) PASTI teachers. The research instrument for this study involves the use of a questionnaire that has been adapted from the instrument founded by Cappelloni (2010), which aims to identify the level of teachers' perception of the needs of children's readiness for kindergarten.

Finding and Discussion

Researchers have conducted a survey to identify the level of teacher performance on children's readiness to enter kindergarten based on seven aspects of children's readiness. Table 4 shows the mean score value, frequency and percentage of aspects in readiness for kindergarten based on the perception of kindergarten teachers in Kelantan. The aspects involved in this study are readiness of approach towards learning, physical readiness (motor skills), social readiness, language and communication readiness and emotional readiness.

Table 4

Show Mean Score, Frequency And Percentage Of Aspects In Readiness For Kindergarten

Aspect of kindergarten readiness	Frequency and Percentage				Mean score	Interpretation of Mean Score
	Mean score 1.00-2.00 (Low)	Mean score 2.01-3.00 (Moderate low)	Mean score 3.01-4.00 (Moderate high)	Mean score 4.01-5.00 (High)		
Readiness of approach towards learning	9 (2.1%)	95 (22.2%)	226 (52.5%)	100 (23.3%)	3.533	Moderate high
Physical readiness (motor skill)	8 (1.8%)	64 (14.9%)	218 (50.6%)	140 (32.6%)	3.724	Moderate high
Social readiness	7 (1.6%)	57 (13.3%)	230 (53.6%)	136 (31.6%)	3.764	Moderate high
Language and Communication readiness	13 (3%)	112 (26.1%)	228 (53.1%)	77 (18.1%)	3.494	Moderate high
Emotional readiness	13 (3.1%)	107 (24.9%)	218 (50.8%)	92 (21.3%)	3.536	Moderate high
Overall level of readiness for kindergarten					3.494	Moderate high

Table 4 shows the overall descriptive statistical analysis that the level of teachers' perception of children's readiness for kindergarten is moderately high (mean=3.588). The level of teachers' perception of children's readiness in the aspect of social readiness (mean=3.764) and the aspect of physical readiness of motor skills (mean=3.724) is moderately high. Both aspects have a high mean value compared to the other aspects. For the aspect of emotional readiness is moderately high (mean=3.536), the aspect of readiness of approach towards learning is moderately high (mean=3.533), and the aspect of language readiness and communication is moderately high (mean=3.494). Referring to all the aspects that have been evaluated through SPSS, it shows that the level of teachers' perception of children's readiness to go to kindergarten is moderately high.

Children's Readiness in Aspects of Social Readiness

Table 5

Mean Score and Standard Deviation of the Social Readiness Item

Social Readiness Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
1. Children can communicate and interact with adults effectively.	3.66	0.862	Moderate high
2. Children can respect other people's rights by not taking or using other people's things without permission and staying at home.	3.7	0.88	Moderate high
3. Children can share and take turns.	3.68	0.913	Moderate high
4. Children can show respect for teachers and other adults.	4.01	0.832	Moderate high
5. Children can resolve disputes by compromise.	3.27	0.949	Moderate high
6. Children can cooperate and play with other children.	3.84	0.87	Moderate high
7. Children can establish new relationships with peers	3.69	0.946	Moderate high
Children's readiness for kindergarten Social Readiness	3.69	0.893	Moderate high

Teachers' perceptions of children's social readiness are moderately high, with this aspect being rated the most favorably compared to other readiness areas. Social readiness encompasses children's behavior in interactions with teachers and peers, and it is seen as a crucial component of preparing for school. Teachers believe that early exposure to social skills is essential for a smooth transition into the school environment. The ability to communicate and engage with others is foundational to social readiness for children. Akhtar and Bilal (2018) emphasize that at the outset of kindergarten, teachers prioritize assessing children's social readiness over academic achievement. The focus is on how well children are prepared to make friends and learn through play. Such social achievements facilitate peer relationships and ease the adaptation to the kindergarten setting (Akhtar & Bilal, 2018). Children who are adept at sharing and showing tolerance are more likely to navigate social interactions successfully (Akhtar & Bilal, 2018). Children will find it easy to share and tolerate with other children.

As children begin to understand and respect differing opinions and the rights of others, they gain a more nuanced understanding of social dynamics. This process involves recognizing that others may have viewpoints that differ from their own and learning to navigate these differences with empathy and consideration. Such skills are fundamental to social readiness, as they lay the groundwork for effective interpersonal interactions. According to Dore et al (2021), this aspect of social readiness is intricately linked to emotional readiness. Their research highlights that children with well-developed social skills are better equipped to manage their emotions. This ability to regulate emotions contributes significantly to their capacity to engage in positive and constructive interactions with peers. Consequently, these skills not only contribute to smoother integration into the kindergarten environment but also support academic and behavioral success.

Children's Readiness in Aspects of Emotional Readiness

Table 6

Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Emotional Readiness Items

Emotional Readiness Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
8. Children can express feelings effectively to others	3.39	0.934	Moderate high
9. Children can show sympathy for the feelings of other children	3.68	0.892	Moderate high
8. Children can show self-control and a good attitude in class throughout the day.	3.53	0.892	Moderate high
9. Children have a high level of self-confidence.	3.52	0.91	Moderate high
10. Children can be away from their parents without fear.	3.56	0.951	Moderate high
Children's readiness for kindergarten in terms of emotional readiness	3.54	0.916	Moderate high

Children's social readiness for kindergarten is intrinsically linked to their emotional readiness. The study reveals that teachers' perceptions of these aspects fall within a medium to high range. According to Akhtar and Bilal (2018), children who can effectively manage their own emotions tend to be more successful in school settings. This is because children are better equipped to form positive peer relationships, which facilitates their adaptation to the school environment. These findings align with prior research indicating that teachers view social-emotional skills as a critical component of school readiness (Curby et al., 2018). Ferreira et al (2021), stated that almost all participants in the previous study stated that it is very important for teachers to encourage interpersonal relationships and help children master emotional language through management and communication skills in the learning process.

The ability to control and express feelings to others is part of the readiness required by children before entering kindergarten (Hustedt et al, 2018). Akhtar and Bilal (2018), further support this notion, noting that children who have mastered emotional skills exhibit enhanced performance upon entering school. This study corroborates this perspective, as teachers perceive children who display self-control and positive attitudes in the classroom as better prepared for school. Additionally, teachers emphasize that children who can comfortably separate from their caregivers have made significant strides toward school readiness. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of children's ability to separate from parents as an indicator of readiness for kindergarten (Xie & Lia, 2018; Haniffy, 2017). Children who handle separation well are often more adept at socializing with peers (Hustedt et al., 2018). Furthermore, emotional readiness contributes to developing empathy, allowing children to better understand and relate to the feelings of others. Thus, this study supports existing literature suggesting that children with stable emotional states interact positively with teachers and peers and effectively communicate their needs and desires.

Children's Readiness in Aspects of Readiness Approach to Learning

Table 8

The Mean Score and Standard Deviation of the Readiness of Approach Towards Learning Item

Readiness Item Approach to Learning	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
11. Children can show great enthusiasm and desire when celebrating new activities	3.94	0.886	Moderate high
12. Children show seriousness in doing tasks	3.83	0.856	Moderate high
13. children can follow difficult tasks	3.27	0.924	Moderate high
14. Children can retell stories they have heard in order of events	3.36	0.895	Moderate high
15. Children can show independence by completing assignments by themselves.	3.52	0.895	Moderate high
16. Children can switch from one activity to another without any problem.	3.52	0.907	Moderate high
17. Children can use BBM as they should	3.62	0.860	Moderate high
18. Children can focus on an activity or task for 10 minutes or more	3.45	0.877	Moderate high
19. Children can create on their own such as starting a task on their own without waiting for instructions	3.28	0.988	Moderate high
Children's readiness for kindergarten Readiness Approach to Learning	3.53	0.899	Moderate high

In this study as well, the researcher wants to identify the teacher's perception of the children's readiness in the aspect of approach towards learning. The findings indicate a moderately high value in this area, reflecting that teachers prioritize children who have had prior exposure to learning experiences at home before entering kindergarten. An effective learning approach encompasses domain-general skills such as curiosity, persistence, planning, and active participation in group learning (Bustamante, 2016). These skills are crucial for early educational development. Rimm-Kaufman (2000) highlights that kindergarten teachers emphasize children's readiness in social skills and self-regulation. However, this focus contrasts with that of parents, who often prioritize basic academic skills. Despite this difference, both perspectives are essential and should be considered in relation to the child's performance and learning abilities.

Teachers perceive that children often exhibit limited cognitive readiness in the early stages of schooling, particularly when initiating tasks independently or tackling challenging activities. This is partly due to the adjustment period required for children to acclimate to a new learning environment in kindergarten. Additionally, the different children's readiness levels can influence the adaptation process for this transition process. Furthermore, children who can accurately retell stories they have heard demonstrate a high level of cognitive development. This aligns with the goals of the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS),

which aims to assess and identify developmental levels in children (Bricker, 2022). Therefore, the findings underscore the importance of supporting children through their initial adjustment to kindergarten, particularly in fostering cognitive readiness for independent and challenging tasks.

Children's Readiness in Aspects of Physical Readiness (Motor Skills)

Table 9

Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Physical Readiness Items (Motor Skills)

Physical Readiness Item (Motor Skills)	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
20. Children show overall good physical health	3.86	0.846	Moderate high
21. Children can jump, jump, climb, kick, run and throw a ball	3.88	0.99	Moderate high
22. Children can write well such as holding a pencil correctly, sketching shapes and letters	3.84	0.894	Moderate high
23. Children can use brushes, scissors, Lego games, and paper glue.	3.59	0.97	Moderate high
24. Children can be independent such as feeding, taking care of themselves in the toilet and packing things	3.9	0.909	Moderate high
Children's readiness for kindergarten Physical readiness (motor skills)	3.81	0.922	Moderate high

Physical development is a critical component of a child's overall growth. This study reveals that teachers' perceptions of children's readiness, particularly concerning physical and motor skills, are moderately high. These findings align with previous research demonstrating a positive correlation between physical development, physical activity and academic performance in primary school students (Wright et al., 2019). Meanwhile, another survey has reported that teachers' concerns about the physical development of 4-year-old children starting school have declined in recent years (Duncombe & Preedy, 2020). Such matters need to be taken into consideration by all parties and need to be addressed immediately. Therefore, with the findings for this aspect, it is explained that teachers attach importance to physical skills and motor skills in school readiness. This result is consistent with the study by Wright et al (2019), which shows a significant positive correlation between physical development and other developmental domains.

The findings of the study prove that teachers view that children's readiness in physical aspects, especially fine and gross motor skills, is very important as preparation for entering kindergarten. Children with underdeveloped physical skills may face challenges in school readiness, behavior, social development, and academic achievement (Duncombe & Preedy, 2020). Therefore, caregivers should prioritize the development of fine and gross motor skills before children enter school. Teachers also recognize that the ability to properly hold a pencil and draw shapes and letters reflects strong physical readiness. This is supported by Duncombe and Preedy (2020), who found that children lacking fine motor skills often struggle with writing and expressing their ideas, which can impact their confidence and classroom learning.

Children's Readiness in Aspects of Language and Communication Readiness

Table 10

Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Language and Communication Readiness Items

Language and Communication Readiness Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
25. Children can obey 2-Step instructions.	3.65	0.811	Moderate high
26. Children can communicate their needs, wishes and thoughts clearly in their mother tongue.	3.4	0.922	Moderate high
27. Children can understand the meaning of words and can use words that are appropriate for their age.	3.55	0.878	Moderate high
28. Children can express their wishes, will and thoughts clearly in language	3.43	0.903	Moderate high
29. Children can listen to a story diligently for 10 minutes or more.	3.44	0.903	Moderate high
Children's readiness for kindergarten for aspects of language and communication readiness	3.49	0.883	Moderate high

Language development plays an important role in children's ability to communicate and express their feelings (Brodin & Renblad, 2019). Referring to the findings, the level of teachers' perception of children's readiness in terms of language and communication readiness is also moderately high. Teachers may believe that the formation of language and communication skills is very important for children before entering kindergarten. It happens because, in the period from birth to 5 years, there will be a process that will determine the basic development of thinking, behavior and emotional well-being (Bakken et al, 2017). During this critical period, advancements in linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional skills are heavily influenced by interactions with adults.

Roberts et al (2019), emphasize that early childhood represents a crucial phase of rapid brain development and heightened neuroplasticity, during which children acquire language skills most effectively. Accordingly, mastery in this skill allows children to be able to communicate their wants and needs and supports to make friends with other friends. However, not all children develop these skills equally due to varying family backgrounds. For teachers, children being able to understand the meaning of words and instructions delivered by the teacher is sufficient at an early stage as an initial preparation to receive education. Therefore, the readiness of language and communication skills has the same importance as social and emotional aspects for children to be ready for kindergarten as highlighted by (Xiea and Lia, 2018).

Conclusion

Ensuring that children are well-prepared for school involves a comprehensive focus on various aspects of readiness, all of which are intricately linked to early childhood development. Effective development and growth during these formative years are crucial for guaranteeing that a child is ready to start school. Preparation for school begins at home, where parental education plays a pivotal role. Parents must concentrate on early developmental stages, as this foundational work enhances children's competencies and skill acquisition necessary for

school readiness. Additionally, collaboration between teachers and parents is essential in supporting children's development and addressing their needs to ensure optimal growth.

Teachers, as frontline observers and facilitators, offer unique insights into the developmental preparedness of their students, encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Their perspectives enrich theoretical frameworks by providing nuanced understandings of readiness beyond standardized assessments, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual capabilities and contextual factors such as home environment and prior educational experiences. This holistic view enhances existing knowledge by bridging theory with practical classroom realities, thereby informing instructional strategies tailored to meet diverse learner needs effectively. Moreover, teachers' perspectives serve a crucial role in educational contexts by shaping curriculum design, fostering inclusive practices, and promoting supportive learning environments that optimize children's developmental trajectories. In essence, their insights not only contribute to advancing theoretical frameworks but also play a pivotal role in translating research into impactful educational practices that promote holistic child development.

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