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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE SKILLS NEEDED TO 'FIT IN' WHEN STARTING SCHOOL

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Abstract

Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at an increased risk of experiencing lower levels of school readiness. Ready children are children who can navigate both the social and academic tasks and challenges of school (Brostrom, 2003). This paper focuses on children's transition to school in low socioeconomic areas. Qualitative findings from 88 children who took part in the research using the 'Draw and Tell' technique (Driessnack, 2005) are explored. The children in this research identified the use of social, emotional and language skills to make friends, and to engage with educators and learning opportunities. In addition to highlighting these skills, the children explained the importance of being physically independent in the school environment. The children's perspectives in low socioeconomic complement existing research, and the insider perspective provided by the children furthers understandings of 'Ready Children'.

Key words: transition to school; ready children; children's perspectives; skills

Introduction

This research identifies children's perceptions of the skills they need when starting school in two low socioeconomic areas in the West of Ireland. Specifically, this paper addresses the qualitative findings from the 'Draw and Tell' technique (Driessnack, 2005) which 88 children took part in. Children's views are rarely evident in research, yet children are now viewed as credible informants in research (Alderson, 2008). The issue of transitioning to school and school readiness from the perspective of children is under-researched in Ireland (Hayes & O'Flaherty, 1997; Kiernan, Axford, Little, Murphy, Greene & Gormley, 2008; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; O'Kane, 2007; Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Moloney, Hayes, Breathnach, Stafford, Carswell, Keegan, Kelleher, McCafferty, O'Keeffe, Leavy, Madden, & Ozonyia, 2016). Furthermore, specifically focusing on children's transition to school in low socioeconomic areas is important (Jackson & Cartmel, 2010; O'Farrelly, Booth, Tatlow-Golden, & Doyle, 2016) and is stipulated within Irish national policy frameworks (DCYA, 2013, 2014).

The paper begins by outlining the literature on school readiness in socioeconomic disadvantaged areas and children's perceptions of the skills needed when starting school. Next, the policy context is identified. Following on from this, the research process is detailed. This focuses on the approach employed to carry out research with children. Finally, the findings are discussed in relation to the literature highlighting children's understandings of the skills they use in school. It is concluded that children are competent in contributing their insights and this must be incorporated into education systems.

The Literature

Dockett and Perry (2009) maintain that school readiness is a relational concept. Therefore, this research was positioned within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This model asserts that development takes place through reciprocal interactions between the child and other persons, located within a set of 'nested' environments including the family and immediate community (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The experience of starting school is considered an ecological transition, as the

school is introduced into children's microsystem (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox & Pianta, 2000). This research was also informed by sociocultural theories and the new sociology of childhood. Focusing on this more holistic approach to school readiness, the study incorporated the dimensions of school readiness as set out by UNICEF (2012) in 'Ready Children, Ready Schools and Ready Families', and the 'Ready Child Equation' as set out by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (2005, p12): 'Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children'. Taking into account children's perceptions is essential to the understanding and development of school readiness practices (Dockett & Perry, 2007) as the transition to school is not always seamless (Ackesjo, 2014).

Poor school readiness is linked to academic problems in the short term (La Paro & Pianta, 2000) and academic failure in the long term (Forget-Dubois, Lemelin, Boivin, Dionne, Seguin, Vitaro & Tremblay, 2007). High socio-economic areas are positively associated with children's school readiness (Leventhal, Dupéré & Brooks-Gunn. 2009). Areas categorised as disadvantaged often experience social, material and economic deprivation. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at an increased risk of experiencing lower levels of school readiness (Janus & Duku, 2007). Low parent education levels, parent smoking, low birth weight, low parent health, children starting school at a younger age, non-attendance at preschool and not looking at books have also been found to impact negatively on children's school readiness skills (Curtin, Madden, Staines & Perry, 2013; Doyle, Mc Entee & Mc Namara, 2010; Janus & Duku, 2007; Layte & McCrory, 2014).

Ready children are children who can navigate both the social and academic tasks and challenges of school (Brostrom, 2003). It is important that within this, children are supported to feel that they belong in the new environment. This readiness does not equate to chronological age but rather children's developmental age in conjunction with supportive people and environments. Accounting for the 'Ready Child', children are more successful starting school when they are more advanced in five domains: Physical well-being and motor development; Social and emotional development; Approaches to learning; Language use; and Cognition and general knowledge (Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp, 1995). It is misguided to expect children to be equally ready for school at the same age (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Nonetheless, older children display greater school readiness skills (Doyle et al., 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2013), and younger children tend to display lower school readiness skills (Curtin et al., 2013; Janus & Duku 2007; Janus & Offord, 2007; McKeown, Pratschke & Haase, 2014). Children experience a more positive transition stating school when they are proficient in the language of instruction. Curtin et al., (2013) found that children who spoke English as a second language can struggle in a school that functions through English. Language skills are also important to children as it facilitates their ability to develop friendships (O'Toole, Hayes & Mhic Mhathúna, 2014).

The number of studies exploring children's perceptions of school readiness, transition and experiences of starting school are increasing (Ackesjo, 2014; Brostrom, 2000; Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004, 2005; Jackson & Cartmel, 2010; O'Farrelly et al., 2016; O'Kane, 2007; Ramey, Lanzi, Phillips, & Ramey, 1998). Children's experiences in school contribute to their own perceptions of the school environment. In particular, children perceive school as a learning environment (Dockett & Perry, 2004; O' Kane, 2007). This perception may lead children to focus more on the knowledge and academic skills they believe are required for school, such as knowing how to write their name (McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Perry & Dockett, 2003). Children acknowledge that fine motor skills are required in order to adjust to writing in school (O'Farrelly et al., 2016). The emphasis on learning in school may lead children to distinguish between work and play (Niesel & Griebel, 2001; O'Kane, 2007), as they perceive play opportunities to be replaced with more structured activities (Ring et al., 2016). This may also reflect the introduction of a formal curriculum in the learning environment. Children highlight

the role of cognitive skills relating to this, including the importance of paying attention, sitting down and following instructions (O'Rourke, O'Farrelly, Booth & Doyle, 2017).

Another challenge that children experience when starting school relates to managing the number and size of the buildings. Children view the physical nature of school as 'big' (O'Toole et al., 2014; Ring et al., 2016) and gross motor skills are needed to navigate this environment (O'Farrelly et al., 2016). In addition to this, children are outspoken about the need to be physically independent in carrying out self-care tasks, particularly in relation to toileting (Tatlow-Golden, O'Farrelly, Booth, & Doyle, 2017). Children are aware of the expectations of the school environment and the requirement to conform to the social norms in school. Children acknowledge the move to a more formal pedagogy and curriculum (White & Sharp, 2007). They also recognise the expectation to do what the educator tells them (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) and to ask for permission in the classroom (Margetts, 2013). Adjusting to the school environment, is dependent on children's social and emotional skills. Studies have shown that the conventional rules in school and the sanctions for not obeying such rules dominate children's narratives (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004; O'Kane, 2007). The disciplinary context is of distinct significance (McGetigan & Gray, 2012; O'Toole et al., 2014). Friendships can act as a buffer to some of the challenges children can face in school. Children often refer to friends positively, it is important to children to have friends in school (O'Toole et al., 2014). Children who did not want to be at school attributed this to not having friends (Dockett & Perry, 2002). Unsurprisingly, children's emotional development is also tested as they begin school. They have demonstrated mixed emotions towards their experience of school (O'Toole et al., 2014). Some children experience feeling sad and scared when starting school (Dockett & Perry, 1999; O'Kane, 2007). Specifically, separating from parents can cause children to be upset (Dockett & Perry, 2004; O'Toole et al., 2014), while separating from old friends and entering into the new school environment can cause children to worry (Ackesjo, 2014). Despite this, some children advise that school is not scary (Margetts, 2013).

The Policy Context

The Irish state considers primary school to be the first step in formal education. Junior infants is the first class children enter when starting school for the first time. Children must be engaging in formal education by the age of six years, however children can start school as young as four-years of age (DES, 2012). In Ireland, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy aims to cover the period from birth to six years. In 2009, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009) developed Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, to be used in preschool settings. This is a descriptive framework, rather than a prescriptive syllabus, and sets out the content to be covered by ECCE practitioners under four themes: Well-Being; Identity and Belonging; Exploring and Thinking; and Communicating. It is based on the principle of active learning. Since 2010, under the free preschool year scheme, a free preschool place became available to all children in Ireland before they begin primary school. This was increased to two years in 2018 (DCYA, 2019). Currently 95% of eligible children are participating in this scheme (DCYA, 2019). It is mandatory for preschools offering places under the free preschool year scheme to follow the Aistear curriculum.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore children's perceptions of starting school. Accordingly, a qualitative exploratory case study research design was employed, comprising of children starting school in two low socioeconomic areas in Ireland. Low socioeconomic areas were the focus of this study as children living in disadvantaged areas are deemed to have

lower levels of school readiness (Lapointe, Ford & Zumbo, 2007), and further insight into the children's own experience in low socioeconomic areas is required (O'Rourke et al., 2017). The 'case' in this research was the event of beginning school. A specific focus of this research was to enable children to present their views of their experience of preparing and starting school. Eighty-eight children took part in this study.

The primary qualitative method of eliciting young children's views in this study was the 'Draw and Tell' technique/activity as it is regarded as both accessible and age appropriate for young children (Driessnack, 2006). Children as young as three years of age are competent in reporting events and the data obtained is determined by a wide range of factors including the context of the interview and the questioning style of the researcher (Ceci, Powell & Principe, 2002). Drawing is generally familiar to young children. Furthermore, drawings can support children's responses by acting as aids to retrieve and report their experiences (Salmon, 2001). The drawing activity acts as a medium; the child can focus on their drawing rather than the researcher as they explain their picture. Drawings can provide information, however, in this research the drawings were not interpreted in order to minimise the influence of the researcher. The 'tell' aspect of the method allows children to give a verbal account of their perceptions and thereby direct and control the data collected (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

The sample consisted of children in the Junior infant class for six weeks in one school in each of the two low socioeconomic areas. The children were aged between four and six years of age, consistent with Irish policy. School A had two classes totalling 40 students in Junior infants. School B had six classes totalling 82 students in Junior infants. In order to build a rapport with the children in each of the two schools and in an attempt to decrease the power imbalance between the children and an adult researcher. The primary researcher was present in each school for one day a week for four weeks before conducting the data collection. The researcher conducted a 'circle time' activity with the children to explain the research to them using a child friendly story booklet designed for the research, and school related props such as school books and a school bag. The 'Draw and Tell' activity was conducted in the classrooms the following week on a class by class basis in each of the six classes. Both caregiver consent and child consent were obtained.

Eighty-eight children in total were present on the days the data collection were undertaken. Participation was voluntary and the children could withdraw at any time. All the children consented to take part in the research and drew pictures. The children were reminded of the booklet they received the previous week and the circle time discussion about starting school. The children were then asked to draw a picture about their experience of starting school, their first day at school or what they do at school. Following the completion of the drawings, the primary researcher circulated the classrooms and asked each child to explain their picture and transcribed their responses. The children were also asked to "Tell me what you do in school", "How did you get ready for starting big school?" and "If a new boy/girl started school what would you show them and tell them about school?". Eighty-two children chose to talk about their picture. The children's narratives arising from the 'tell' component of the data collection were analysed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis undertaken in this research adapted and integrated the coding phases outlined by Boyatzis (1998), Neuman (2003) and Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved generating codes that contribute to the development of patterned themes. Initial open coding of the transcripts identified codes derived from text relating to the research question and reoccurring unrelated text in the transcripts. Following on from this, transcripts were revisited, initial codes were re-examined to determine the suitability of the codes, irrelevant material was discarded, and where necessary new codes were developed. A final check of codes and text extracts was carried out to ensure that the data fits the code. Two transcripts were independently coded by the second researcher to ensure consistency in analysis. The codes that emerged included: Cognitive skills; Emotional skills;

Language and communication skills; Physical skills; School readiness characteristics; Social skills; Routines; Rules; Discipline and behaviour; Friendships; Social support and networks; Feelings towards school; Socialisation; Rewards; and Gender. The theme that encapsulates these codes and is the focus on this paper is 'Ready Children: Fitting In'.

Findings

The findings presented explore the skills children use and need as they start and continue their journey in Junior Infants. The term 'children' is capitalised when appropriate to personify the children who took part in the research. This theme 'Ready Children: Fitting In' identifies the Children's views of how they blend in at school. This incorporates the skills children use to manage school life and the importance of friendship in school. The skills the Children identified as necessary in becoming a 'school child' were categorised under the domains of school readiness as set out by Kagan et al. (1995): physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language use; and cognition and general knowledge. In addition to this, their awareness and adherence of the discipline system is also explored.

Physical well-being and motor development: In terms of physical well-being and motor development, physical independence and self-care were of particular significance to the Children. The Children indicated these skills with pride, *"I knew how to go to the toilet",* and *"Eat lunch, I eat everything then I'm finished I go outside".* Furthermore, being healthy is important in order to attend school, *"I knew you go home when you were sick".* Developed gross motor skills to play and navigate the physical environment, *"Go outside, go on slide, go on round about and bridge"* and *"We playing football outside in yard",* and fine motor skills to engage in prewriting and writing activities were acknowledged by the Children, *"Build constructions, colour, pegging, sort objects, draw letters, building blocks".*

Social and emotional development: Social and emotional development skills highlighted by the Children's views encompassed the need to engage with others, to be nice and regulate their emotions. The Children recognised friendship as a core part of school life. They referred to their past friendships, their current friendships, and the potential of making new friends;

> *"Steven was my friend in playschool",*
>
> *"It's all my friends in my class and all the other class",*
>
> *"We'll make new friends".*

The desire to be part of the collective was strongly evident throughout the research; the Children often used *'we'* to depict their school life. Being nice was intertwined in this. Prosocial skills such as being friendly, *"I be your friend and I won't ever fight with you"* and offering to play with others and welcoming new children, *"Show her to her seat…Tell her you can make friends"* contribute to the development of peer relationships.

Happiness was largely expressed by the Children in relation to their feelings towards starting school, *"I liked it when I started".* On the other hand, some Children were upset by the experience, *"I was so happy to come to school…Corena (classmate) cry like a baby…When Mommy left that day I didn't cry, I was a big girl".* Controlling or not displaying sadness appears to be an achievement for some of the Children as they attributed this ability to being 'big'. The Children were also aware that they must regulate their anger, *"Can't be getting cross with teacher".*

Approaches to learning: The Children made some references to approaches to learning but in comparison to the other skills outlined by the Children, they focused less on these learning

dispositions. The Children's attitude to aspects of learning varied, *"I love homework"* and *"Don't like homework"*. Nonetheless, the Children largely demonstrated a willingness to concentrate and pay attention in class, *"Look at teacher when she showing you something"*. This willingness to embrace learning initially may arise from the positive reinforcement strategies used in the classroom to encourage the children to engage in learning and abide by rules, *"You get stickers off teacher"*. These efforts can support children to put more effort in and stay focused. The play-based learning can make learning more attractive for children, *"They're loads of nice things to do, we play games like outside"*.

Language use: Social and academic participation in school is predominantly facilitated through verbal communication. Opportunities to develop language and literacy skills are part of their everyday routines, *"When songs come on we sing"*, and *"We read a book"*. Language skills also facilitates engagement with other children and educators. The Children indicated that they would ask new incoming children, *"Would you like to play with toys?"* and *"If she was going to the bathroom to ask teachers"*. Further to this, the Children made a distinction between the two languages being taught in the class, *"Learning Songs, Irish"* and *"Learn English"*. The Children's oral language skills were demonstrated through the 'Tell' component of the research.

Cognition and general knowledge: The Children acknowledged that they are taught new knowledge and skills in school, *"People were getting teached"*. For many of the Children, cognition and general knowledge related to aspects of physical, logico-mathematical and social-conventional knowledge such as knowledge of norms, colours, numbers and shapes, *"Colours, numbers…have to do numbers"*. Learning new knowledge and skills takes place in the environment, *"Do our maths at schools"*, *"Sort objects"* and *"Guess what that is game…matching"*.

Knowing and following rules: The narrative of obedience was dominant throughout the data collection with the Children. The Children were preoccupied with the rules and instructions that existed in school. These rules largely focused on classroom management strategies such as the ability to control impulsive actions;

> *"To sit down"*,
>
> *"We put up our quiet hand"*,
>
> *"Have eyes on teacher and arms folded"*,
>
> *"If she was going to the bathroom to ask teachers"*.

In the context of fitting in, the Children associated disobedience with being bold. Being viewed as 'bold' has implications for children in relation to their friendships, and also their school experience and school career;

> *"If somebody is bold I don't like them"*,
>
> *"Teacher will be cross if you are not good"*,
>
> *"If ye be bold the teacher takes you to the principal"*.

The children are aware that educators monitor their behaviour. They also monitor other children's behaviour. They understand that there are consequences to misbehaviour.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore children's perceptions of starting school in areas of low socioeconomic status. The findings demonstrate that children are capable of describing experiences of starting school, as their perspectives largely reflect the existing literature.

Children are aware of the environment, the role of the educators and the skills they use in school. Challenging the myth that readiness is a specific condition (Willer & Bredekamp, 1990), children bring a wide range of skills and learning experiences that can be further enhanced and nurtured in the school environment.

The physical nature of school life is prevalent in children's subjective experiences, as similar to existing research, the Children in this study outlined the role of both gross and fine motor skills in their participation in school (Perry & Dockett, 2003; O'Kane, 2007; O'Toole et al., 2014). Physical independence skills, particularly self-care such as eating and toileting were raised by the Children. The Children's communication skills contribute to this further as they identified the need to request permission to use the toilet and ask for assistance when necessary. It is likely that these skills are important to children as children are entering into an environment with much higher child to adult ratios and this requires children to be more self-sufficient. As in previous studies, the Children place substantial importance on friendships (O'Toole et al., 2014; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016). They acknowledge the potential to meet with other children in school and become friends. This process is supported through the display of prosocial skills and language skills. It would appear that being part of the collective enables children to enjoy and feel positive towards school. This social support may be of value to children in the school environment and supporting the children to make friends could prove to be beneficial in enriching children's experiences of school. It is likely that friendships can support children to be happier in school.

The Children in this study largely expressed positive emotions towards school. This is reassuring as children who have a positive attitude towards school are more likely to embrace learning in school (Ramey et al., 1998; Valeski & Stipek, 2001). According to the Children, feelings of sadness should be regulated, specifically the need to avoid crying. This was also evident in McGettigan and Gray's (2012) study. The Children also accepted the need to control their anger. Impulsive behaviour is often frowned upon in schools. Children are expected to conform to routines that facilitate the management of large group sizes and demonstrate acceptable behaviour. The Children were quite outspoken about the rules of the school as in other studies (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; O'Kane, 2007; O'Toole et al., 2014). Children who do not follow the rules are considered bold and may be rejected. From this, it is clear that children's social and emotional development is of significance to children's school readiness and must therefore be cultivated. It is also evident that the school environment, and the educator and peer relationships within the environment play a role in socialising children.

The Children recognised that school is a formal learning environment, a finding evident in previous studies (Dockett & Perry, 2004; O'Kane, 2007). However, in their conversations the Children mainly focused on tangible learning outcomes rather than the process of learning. It is often assumed that children should start school with the ability to count, recite the alphabet and recognise colours and shapes (Kagan et al., 1995). This was the main type of knowledge highlighted by the Children in this research. The role of the educators in this is unquestionable as they involve the children in learning opportunities typically set out by the curriculum. This may have therefore resulted in the children making minimal references to the Approaches to Learning domain. This domain takes into account children's dispositions towards learning such as eagerness, curiosity and perseverance. The absence of references to learning dispositions may also be a consequence of the children's presentation of dispositions under the guise of rules, or that learning in the classroom is goal orientated. Learning dispositions support children to engage in and enjoy learning, especially when the task is challenging. The ECCE curriculum in Ireland calls for the nurturing of learning dispositions as they contribute to children becoming confident and competent learners (NCCA, 2009). Conversely, learning dispositions is not an explicit curriculum area in the primary school curriculum.

Conclusion

This research identifies children's perceptions of starting school and reaffirms the Children's ability to be active research participants. The Children were aware of the physical, social, emotional, language and knowledge skills they use in school. The skills identified by the Children correspond to the five domains of school readiness (Kagan, 1995), demonstrating that school readiness is multidimensional. The Children's viewpoint is vital as it contributes the insider perspective to the experience of starting school in low socio-economic areas. Although it is not possible to generalise the findings, the findings corroborate previous research, thereby indicating that the socioeconomic status of the area does not impact significantly on children's subjective experiences of starting school. It is recommended that children are involved in the development of transition practices as they are the main stakeholder in this ecological transition. Starting school can place new demands on children and their development. Children's success in school does not solely depend on knowledge and academic skills. At this stage, "personal, rather than intellectual, ability is the key to giving children the best start to school" (Fabian, 2002, p.63). School readiness discussions and preparations should focus on both the cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of children's development whilst also attending to the school environment. Further research specifically examining children's subjective experiences of the approaches to learning domain may benefit the development the primary school curriculum.

Acknowledgements

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