

Examination of Primary School Teachers' Opinions on School Readiness Skills: Türkiye and the United States of America Example

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ABSTRACT

The transition to primary school is a crucial stage for children, teachers, and parents, with a particular focus on first-grade readiness. Teachers and parents worry that children must be well-prepared for the academic challenges of school. Primary school introduces a new social environment where children engage in structured educational activities, develop friendships, and acquire foundational academic skills. A child's readiness for school, encompassing knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors, is influenced by prior experiences, which vary significantly among children from different backgrounds. This cultural variation affects the expectations of school readiness and academic success. This study aims to explore the perspectives of first-grade teachers from Turkey and the United States regarding essential school readiness skills. It also seeks to identify which skills these teachers prioritize. The study involved 126 first-grade teachers (63 from Turkey and 63 from the U.S.) and used a "Demographic Information Form" and a "Primary School Readiness Skills Survey" for data collection. The findings revealed key cultural differences: Turkish teachers emphasized "hand-eye coordination" in physical development, while American teachers highlighted "age-appropriate fine motor skills." Both groups ranked "following the teacher's instructions" as the most important factor in social-emotional development and "willingness to learn" as the most important approach to learning. For language development, Turkish teachers prioritized "expressing thoughts and feelings fluently," while American teachers focused on "phonological awareness." In cognitive development, Turkish teachers valued "conceptual knowledge," while American teachers emphasized "basic math skills." Both groups agreed on the importance of self-care skills, such as using the bathroom and personal hygiene.

KEYWORDS

School readiness; school readiness skills; primary school teacher.

INTRODUCTION

The transition between educational levels is a critical period for children, teachers, and parents alike (Steen, 2011; Winter & Kelley, 2008). However, parents and teachers are particularly concerned about children starting first grade because they believe their children will be involved in more academic activities at school and therefore need to be well-prepared for school (Winter & Kelly, 2008). When a child starts school, they leave the family environment where they feel comfortable in every sense and enter a completely different environment. In this environment, they meet a teacher and certain rules for the first time. A child's ability to meet the requirements of this process and adapt to this new environment requires a certain level of preparation (Erkan & Kırca, 2010; Erkan, 2011). School readiness is generally viewed as the skills (cognitive, language, academic, and social-emotional) that children possess when they start school, referring to the skills and capabilities that form the foundation for academic success. School readiness refers to a child's ability to meet the school's educational objectives and expectations (Parker et al., 1999). In its broadest sense, school readiness is the product of the interaction between the children, their environment, and their cultural experiences, all aimed at maximizing their learning outcomes. The primary goal of school readiness is to ensure a smooth transition for children to first grade (Winter & Kelley 2008). If children arrive at primary school better prepared, they will benefit more from school (Myers, 1992).

School Readiness Skills

There has long been a consensus that children's school readiness skills should be measured across five interrelated areas, as developed by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1997). According to the NEGP, children's school readiness has five dimensions: physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge (NEGP, 1991). The NEGP proposes that children's school readiness performance encompasses a wide range of skills, abilities, and individual characteristics supported by families, teachers, and educational environments (NEGP, 1995).

School Readiness and Transition to School

School readiness is crucial for increasing equity in access to education and learning, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many children living in poor communities still lack access to preschool services and early learning opportunities at home. This situation underscores the importance of equal opportunity in education. This equality is impacted both individually and globally. At the individual level, multiple perspectives (developmentally, socially, and economically structured) are seen as crucial in school readiness, child development, and learning. At the global level, school readiness is closely tied to a child's integration into society, and it is viewed as an educational tool that benefits a country's social and economic growth.

The transition to school is one of the most important turning points in a child's life, encompassing diverse and new experiences. Primary school is a social environment distinct from the child's usual family life and environment. In this new environment, children participate in planned and structured educational activities, make new friends, and acquire basic academic skills (Erkan, 2011). The transition to school falls within the broader concept of school readiness and is examined in the context of the support systems that foster children's academic and social skills. Children enter school from diverse environments and with diverse experiences. When they meet the classroom and the teacher, they are faced with different expectations for behavior and performance (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). School is a place with striking differences from home. This difference goes beyond the physical environment and the people with whom the child interacts; it also manifests itself in activities, expectations, behavioral styles, and learning styles.

A child's ability to fulfill the expectations of basic education, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors, and to adapt to this new environment, is closely related to their previous experiences. Numerous studies have demonstrated the relationship between a successful transition to school and subsequent academic and social success (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Pianta et al., 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Therefore, the transition to school can be considered one of the most significant changes that occur in early childhood (Curtis, 1986). This transition, a significant developmental and interactional process during which children change and grow, also involves interactions with their peer groups, families, teachers, schools, and even the broader societal structures (Ramey & Ramey, 1994). The most important goal in this process is to support children in navigating this transition smoothly and without undue stress (Winter & Kelley, 2008). Children begin first grade feeling anxious and worried, or excited and ready and eager to learn, depending on their school readiness process (Steen, 2011). A study conducted with first-grade teachers found that 16% of the children in their classes had significant difficulties transitioning to first grade, and half experienced some difficulties with the transition to school (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). While age is still considered a significant determinant for children's school entry in many developed countries, particularly the United States, recent emphasis has also begun on factors related to developmental characteristics (Farran, 2011). In Türkiye, many children enter primary school directly, without any prior preparation for basic education or acquiring school-readiness skills (Unicef, 2012). Calendar age is considered the primary criterion for children to begin primary education, and the child's developmental characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses are not adequately considered. However, while age is a necessary criterion for starting school, it alone does not guarantee a child's readiness for school and academic success (Dockett et al., 2008). As a result, children, families, teachers, and school administrators face numerous problems and challenges during the primary school entry process. Raising awareness, supporting, and guiding first-grade teachers is crucial for mitigating these problems stemming from the Turkish education system. Therefore, examining studies conducted abroad with positive results from a cross-cultural perspective and comparing the

perspectives of teachers from different cultures on children's preparation for school and transition to primary school is crucial.

The conceptual framework for this cross-cultural study, which will examine first-grade teachers' views on school readiness skills and the transition to primary school, was designed with reference to American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The fundamental principle of Bronfenbrenner's theory is that children are influenced by their environment, and this environment, in turn, profoundly influences their developmental process. Bronfenbrenner states that the ecological environment within a child's development consists of various systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, and that this is an organized system that grows and coexists mutually between individuals and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Teachers' Views and Expectations Regarding School Readiness and Transition to School

Teachers play a crucial role in children's successful transition to school. Successful teachers encourage children's learning efforts, model their learning, and help them increase their learning capacities. They also organize the classroom environment according to program objectives and develop plans based on educational goals (Norlatifah & Novitawati, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to understand teachers' perspectives on the skills, behaviors, and attitudes essential for children's academic learning. These views have a significant impact on teachers' teaching practices and children's academic success. As previously mentioned, numerous international studies (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2007) have explored teachers' expectations regarding the transition to school. However, very few studies have explored teachers' views and expectations regarding school readiness and transition within a sociocultural context (Maxson, 1996). A review of the relevant literature found no studies examining teachers' views on school readiness and transition in diverse cultures, such as Türkiye and the United States.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine, from a cross-cultural perspective, the views of Turkish and American first-grade teachers regarding the school readiness skills that preschool children should possess as they transition to school. Another aim of the study is to identify the developmental areas that teachers consider most important for a successful transition to school. This study aims to identify the similarities and differences in the views of teachers from two distinct cultures regarding school readiness skills. It is expected that understanding teachers' views on school readiness skills will significantly contribute to supporting children's skills and learning for success in school, as well as to designing effective school transition programs.

METHOD

Research Design

This research was conducted using quantitative research techniques. Within the scope of quantitative research, numerical data related to the research topic is obtained from a sample

that represents the research population and is tested within the scope of research problems and hypotheses to reach the research conclusion. In other words, the aim of quantitative research is not to conduct an intensive analysis of the research topic, but to obtain a result based on more superficial and numerical data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). The research model is the descriptive survey model. The descriptive survey model is a research model that aims to describe participants' opinions, interests, and attitudes on a topic or event through survey form options provided by the researcher and is conducted on relatively larger samples (Gay et al., 2009; Büyüköztürk et al., 2019).

Participants

The study group consisted of first-grade teachers from public and private primary schools in Ankara, representing Turkish culture, and teachers from primary schools in Lubbock, Texas, representing American culture, who were selected using the "convenient sampling" method (Erkuş, 2009). The study was based on volunteerism and having served as a first-grade teacher for at least two years. The study sample consisted of a total of 126 first-grade teachers, 63 from Türkiye and 63 from the United States.

Of the Turkish teachers participating in the study, 51 were female and 12 were male. Their average age was 33, and their average professional experience was 11 years. Sixty of the teachers held a bachelor's degree, and three held a master's degree. All of the American teachers were female. Their average age was 34, and their average professional experience was 10 years. Fifty teachers held a bachelor's degree, and thirteen held a master's degree. The abbreviations used in the study were "TT" for Turkish classroom teachers and "AT" for American teachers.

Data Collection Tool

In this study, a "Demographic Information Form" and a "Primary School Readiness Skills Survey" were used to determine the opinions of Turkish and American teachers regarding school readiness skills.

Demographic Information Form:

The Demographic Information Form, prepared by the researcher, includes four questions regarding the participants' gender, age, professional seniority, and educational status.

Primary School Readiness Skills Survey

The Primary School Readiness Skills Survey was developed by Atış-Akyol et al. in 2020 to determine teachers' views on skills related to primary school readiness. The survey is a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire comprising 26 items and encompasses six dimensions related to primary school readiness. These dimensions are "Physical Development," "Social and Emotional Development," "Language Development," "Approaches to Learning," "Cognitive Development," and "Self-Care Skills." These dimensions were determined based on the five main areas related to school readiness identified by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1995).

The Primary School Readiness Skills Survey includes four items for physical development, six for social and emotional development, four for language development, three for approaches

to learning, four for cognitive development, and five for self-care skills. Responses to each survey item are as follows: (1) I strongly disagree, (2) I slightly agree, (3) I somewhat agree, (4) I pretty much agree, and (5) I strongly agree. The survey is administered individually, and each survey takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Data Collection Process

The data for the study was collected in two stages. In the first stage, the researcher collected data on American teachers in March and April 2019. In the second stage, data on Turkish teachers were collected from first-grade teachers in April and May of the 2021-2022 academic year. To conduct the study, the researcher first met with school principals in both countries face-to-face, explained the purpose of the study, and obtained the necessary permissions to conduct the study with the teachers. Participants were sent an information letter and a voluntary participation form informing them that participation in the study was voluntary, that personal and institutional information would not be requested or shared in any medium, and that the questions would be for the sole purpose of gathering opinions. The data collection tools (Demographic Information Form and Primary School Readiness Skills Survey) were administered online to teachers who agreed to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the Primary School Readiness Skills Survey were organized in tables and described and interpreted using frequency, percentage, and mean values.

FINDINGS

In this study, first-grade teachers' views on the school readiness skills that preschool children should have in the transition to school and the developmental areas they find most important in the transition to school were examined from an intercultural perspective and the findings are presented below.

Findings Regarding the First Objective

The views of Turkish and American first-grade teachers who participated in the study regarding the school readiness skills that preschool children should have as they transition to school are shown in Table 1 (see appendix).

Considering the physical development skills listed in Table 1, Turkish classroom teachers stated that the most necessary skill for children to prepare for primary school is "having hand-eye coordination" ($\bar{X}=4.66$), while American teachers stated that they see "having age-appropriate small muscle skills" ($\bar{X}=4.29$) as the most necessary skill.

Considering social-emotional skills, both Turkish ($\bar{X}=4.70$) and American teachers ($\bar{X}=4.56$) viewed the ability to "follow the teacher's instructions" as the most essential skill (Total $\bar{X}=4.63$).

Regarding skills related to approaches to learning, both Turkish ($\bar{X}=4.60$) and American teachers ($\bar{X}=4.53$) viewed the ability to "be willing to learn" as the most essential skill for school

readiness (Total $\bar{X}=4.56$).

Considering language development skills, Turkish teachers viewed the ability to "communicate children's feelings and thoughts in understandable and fluent Turkish" ($\bar{X}=4.46$) as the most essential skill, while American teachers stated that "possessing phonological awareness" ($\bar{X}=4.48$) was the most essential skill.

Considering cognitive development skills, it was determined that Turkish teachers considered the skill of "having conceptual knowledge" as the most necessary skill ($\bar{X}=4.46$), while American teachers stated the skill of "having basic mathematical skills" ($\bar{X}=4.40$) as the most necessary skill.

Considering self-care skills, both Turkish ($\bar{X}=4.72$) and American teachers ($\bar{X}=4.62$) indicated that "self-care and toileting" was the most essential skill (Total $\bar{X}=4.67$).

While both Turkish and American teachers identified the same skills as the most essential for school readiness in "Social-emotional development," "Approaches to learning," and "Self-care skills," they emphasized different skills in "Physical development," "Language development," and "Cognitive development." The findings indicate that teachers in both cultures have similar and different perspectives on the skills they consider essential for primary school readiness.

Findings Regarding the Second Objective

Table 2 shows the rankings of Turkish and American first-grade teachers regarding the developmental areas they consider most important during the transition to school.

Table 2.

According to teachers' opinions, the most important development area in the transition to primary school

Development Area	Turkish primary school teachers		American primary school teachers	
	Ranking	TSO	Ranking	ASO
Physical Development	2	62	6	59
Social-emotional dev.	3	59	3	59
Approaches to learning.	4	61	4	59
Language Development	5	62	2	59
Cognitive Development	6	60	1	61
Self-care Skills	1	61	5	62

1= the most important, 6 the least important

As shown in Table 2, when teachers rank the developmental areas they consider most important for the transition to primary school, it is evident that Turkish teachers prioritize "self-care skills" as the most important, whereas American teachers rank "cognitive development" as the most important.

Turkish and American teachers ranked "social and emotional development" as the third

most important, and "approaches to learning" as the fourth most important.

While Turkish teachers ranked "cognitive development" as the "least important" developmental area for the transition to primary school, American teachers ranked "physical development" as the "least important." These findings suggest that there are both similarities and differences in teachers' rankings of developmental areas according to their perceived importance.

DISCUSSION

This study comparatively examined the views of Turkish and American first-grade teachers, representing different cultures, on the skills children need to have for a smooth transition to primary school. Analysis of the findings revealed both similarities and differences in the views of Turkish and American first-grade teachers regarding school readiness skills.

Among these similar views, both Turkish and American teachers rated the skills of "Following Teacher Instructions" in the Social-Emotional Development Area, "Willingness to Learn" in the Approaches to Learning Area, and "Self-Care Skills" in the Self-Care Skills Area as the most essential skills. School readiness encompasses the academic, cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills children need to successfully transition to the next level of education (Brown & Lan, 2015). Previous studies on school readiness have shown that teachers emphasize social skills more than other skills for school readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2002; Koçyigit & Saban, 2014; Lin et. al., 2003). A study by Atış-Akyol et al. (2020) found that first-grade teachers ranked self-care skills as the most important skill for school readiness. This finding from the presented study aligns with the findings of the aforementioned studies.

Teachers highlighted various skills as the most essential in preparing for school, including those related to physical development, language development, and cognitive development. In physical development, Turkish teachers viewed "hand-eye coordination" as the most essential skill, while American teachers considered "age-appropriate fine motor skills" to be the most essential skill. Previous studies on the subject (Cadoret et al., 2018; Oberer et al., 2017) have indicated that children's fine motor development is related to their literacy development and is a factor that facilitates the transition to primary school and their readiness. In the area of language development, Turkish teachers viewed "the ability to convey feelings and thoughts in understandable and fluent Turkish" as the most essential skill, whereas American teachers considered "phonological awareness" to be the most crucial skill. Minifoğlu and Gürşimşek (2023) and Gündüz and Çalışkan (2013) examined the main objectives of literacy preparation activities according to the opinions of first-grade and preschool teachers. In their study, both teacher groups shared a common view on the importance of establishing phonological awareness. The finding that Turkish teachers consider children's ability to clearly express their feelings and thoughts in the field of language development to be the most essential factor for school readiness suggests that this stems from the teachers' belief that this developmental area is a crucial determinant of academic success. In the field of cognitive development, Turkish

teachers identified "possessing concept knowledge" as the most essential skill for school readiness, whereas American teachers indicated "possessing basic math skills" as the most crucial skill. Bernier et al. (2020) determined that school readiness is the result of cyclical and relational effects between social and cognitive factors during early childhood. Acquiring prior knowledge of concepts such as shapes and numbers, which are necessary for academic success in relation to mental development, is considered a strong predictor of academic success and school readiness during the formal education process (Duncan et al., 2007). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems approach states that the educational culture within the family, which falls within the child's microsystem, and the school environment, which lies within the mesosystem, can differ (Okagaki & Diamond, 2000). Consequently, the developmental goals expected of children regarding defining academic success and primary school readiness also differ. From a broader perspective, it can be argued that the culture within the macrosystem influences the developmental skills expected for primary school readiness (Kitson, 2002). Therefore, the developmental skills teachers in different cultures expect from children and the extent to which they deem these skills necessary will also vary. Teachers' differing perspectives may also stem from the multidimensional nature of the concept of primary school readiness. This is because the concept of primary school readiness encompasses various stakeholders, including families, teachers (preschool teachers and primary school teachers), children, and society, emphasizing the need to support children across all developmental areas. Therefore, these differences are thought to stem from the sample groups' own experiences, opinions, expectations, and cultural differences. Research has shown that different societies may hold varying views on children's school readiness (Graue, 1993) and that cultural contexts can impact teachers' expectations regarding the transition to school (Ojala, 2000; Weikart, 1999). In light of this information, it can be stated that the findings of the present study align with the relevant literature.

Another finding of the study was that when teachers ranked the developmental areas they considered important for the transition to primary school according to their level of importance, Turkish teachers ranked the area of "Self-care skills" as primarily important for the transition to primary school. In contrast, American teachers ranked the area of "Cognitive development" as the most important. This finding of the study may be due to Turkish teachers' expectations that improved self-care skills would facilitate educational activities in primary school. Previous research on school readiness has found that first-grade teachers ranked self-care skills as the most important area for school readiness (Atış-Akyol et al., 2020). Parallel to this finding of the study, Chan (2012) also found that preschool teachers ranked self-care skills as their top priority. It was determined that Turkish and American teachers ranked the area of "Social and Emotional Development" as the third-most important and "Approaches to Learning" as the fourth-most important. While Turkish teachers ranked the "Cognitive Development" area as the "least important" developmental area for the transition to primary school, American teachers ranked the "Physical Development" area as the "least important" developmental area. These findings suggest that there are both similarities and differences between the two groups

of teachers' opinions when ranking developmental areas according to their importance. While some studies on the subject emphasize more specific developmental areas, others (Kutluca Canbulat & Yıldızbaş, 2015; Şahin et al., 2013) consider children's school readiness as a support for holistic development, stating that they should be prepared in all areas. The NEGP also reported that school readiness is influenced by and shaped by individual, conceptual, and cultural variables (NEGP, 1997).

Recommendations

In future studies, teachers' experiences can be analyzed and interpreted through real-world examples.

To provide a more holistic perspective on the issue, more studies examining the views of all stakeholders in school readiness can be conducted.

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APPENDIX**Table 1.**

Turkish and American first-grade teachers' views on primary school readiness skills.

Primary School		TT										AT				
Development Area	Skills	5	4	3	2	1	\bar{X}	5	4	3	2	1	\bar{X}	Total		
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	I	X	
Physical Development	Being physically healthy	56	38	6	0	0	4.52	35	49	16	0	0	4.19	4.35		
	Having hand-eye coordination	68	24	8	0	0	4.66	34	60	6	0	0	4.27	4.46		
	Having age-appropriate gross motor skills	56	38	6	0	0	4.52	27	56	16	1	0	4.08	4.30		
	Having age-appropriate fine motor skills	57	35	5	3	0	4.48	38	52	10	0	0	4.29	4.38		
														4.54	4.20	4.37
Social-Emotional Development	Expressing feelings correctly	67	22	10	1	0	4.58	38	59	3	0	0	4.36	4.47		
	Self-soothing	49	36	11	2	2	4.28	49	43	8	0	0	4.41	4.34		
	Showing empathy	56	25	14	3	2	4.28	39	44	18	0	0	4.21	4.24		
	Establishing positive peer relationships	63	29	5	3	0	4.56	52	40	8	0	0	4.44	4.50		
	Adapting to school without separation anxiety	62	33	5	0	0	4.62	38	41	20	1	0	4.16	4.39		
	Following the teacher's instructions	67	30	3	0	0	4.70	59	38	3	0	0	4.56	4.63		
														4.50	4.35	4.42
Approaches to learning	Studying Alone	38	48	14	0	0	4.20	3	36	56	5	0	3.38	3.79		
	Willingness to learn	47	41	10	2	0	4.60	53	47	0	0	0	4.53	4.56		
	Problem-solving skills	49	41	10	0	0	4.40	33	53	14	0	0	4.19	4.29		

													4.40	4.03	4.21
Language Development	Expressing yourself in understandable and proper Turkish	59	28	11	1	1	4.46	30	60	10	0	0	4.21	4.28	
	Understanding and interpreting stories/texts	46	40	13	1	0	4.28	40	40	20	0	0	4.19	4.23	
	Phonological awareness	44	30	21	3	2	4.06	59	33	5	3	0	4.48	4.27	
	Doodling for writing purposes	47	40	13	0	0	4.30	41	42	15	2	0	4.22	4.26	
													4.27	4.27	4.26
Cognitive Development	Concept knowledge	57	30	13	0	0	4.46	41	48	11	0	0	4.30	4.38	
	Basic math skills	46	35	16	3	0	4.20	49	43	6	2	0	4.40	4.30	
	Addition/subtraction operations	48	25	24	3	0	4.12	38	41	18	3	0	4.14	4.13	
	Establishing cause-and-effect relationships	45	41	14	0	0	4.28	29	45	24	2	0	4.02	4.15	
													4.26	4.21	4.24
Self-Care Skills	Dressing and undressing	57	37	6	0	0	4.54	38	45	14	3	0	4.17	4.35	
	Ability to meet toilet and cleaning needs	70	25	5	0	0	4.72	68	25	6	0	0	4.62	4.67	
	Being able to eat without spilling food	67	27	6	0	0	4.66	30	41	21	8	0	3.94	4.30	
	Taking responsibility for belongings	67	28	5	0	0	4.68	43	44	11	2	0	4.29	4.48	
	Keeping the environment tidy	62	36	2	0	0	4.62	22	57	19	2	0	4.00	4.31	
													4.64	4.20	4.42

5 =strongly agree; 4 = pretty much agree; 3 = somewhat agree; 2 = slightly agree; 1 = strongly disagree