

Age of entry to Grade 1 and school readiness – Its effects on learners' academic achievements

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ABSTRACT

Admission policies on age of entry to Grade 1 vary across countries, and also across ministries, education systems and states. Thus, deliberations continue to resonant in numerous countries as to what the age of entry to Grade 1 should be and how it will impact on learners' academic achievements. This qualitative study investigates learners' age of entry to Grade 1 and their levels of readiness for formal learning by conducting interviews with Foundation Phase educators in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study found that the learner's age plays a significant role in determining whether the learner is physically, cognitively and emotionally ready to be enrolled in Grade 1 and five-year-old children are certainly not ready for formal schooling. Consequently, this study advocates a review of the school admission policy with regard to age of entry to Grade 1 and that a measurement tool that is appropriate for the South African context be explored to evaluate school readiness.

Keywords: admission policy, Grade 1, school entry age, school readiness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Age of school entry is the minimum age a child must reach before being eligible to enter Grade 1 (Prince Edward Island Department of Education 2002:1). Age is related to features of development such as physical, social and emotional maturity, as well as academic skills. Scholarly interest and educational research on age of entry to school and school readiness focus predominantly on Pre-school or Grade R learners (Legacy, Zesiger, Friend & Poulin-Dubois 2018:1317-1333; Hartman, Winsler & Manfra 2017:255-273; Prinsloo & Reid 2015:94-101; Quirk, Nylund-Gibson & Furlong 2013:437- 449; Weiland 2016:1763-1776; Pekdoğan & Akgül 2017:144-154; Ziv 2013:306-320; Schmitt, McClelland, Tominey & Acock 2015:20-31). Age of entry to Grade 1 and school readiness for Grade 1, however, might be as important as age of entry to Grade R in determining academic outcomes. Because of considerable international debate on age of starting school, no one entry age has been established (Sharp 2002:1). In South Africa, there appears to be a paucity of studies that focus specifically on age of entry to Grade 1. Thus, this study aimed to investigate school readiness and the age of entry to Grade 1, and its effects on Foundation Phase learners' academic achievements. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

- 1. Internationally, what is the minimum age of entry to Grade 1?
- 2. In South Africa, what is the minimum age of entry to Grade 1?
- 3. What are the perceptions of educators in selected English-medium primary schools about the South African policy on age of entry to Grade 1 and school readiness?
- 4. What recommendations arise from this study?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Grade 1 Entrance Age Polices and its Implications

Government mandatory school attendance laws require children to attend school over a specified age range, while also stipulating the minimum age at which children may be enrolled in public schools. After many years of conflicting studies, no one school entry age has been established. As a result, the policy on age of entry to Grade 1 varies across countries and states.



Table 1: Policy on age of entry to primary school in 44 Education Systems that participated in the Progress in International Literacy Study in 2006

Policy on age of entry to primary school	5 years	6 years	6½ 2 years	7 years	Between 6 and 7	Between 6 and 8	Between 6 ¹ /2	Total
					years	years	and 7	
							years	
Number of education	6	27	1	7	1	1	1	44
systems								

(Mullis, Matin, Kennedy & Foy 2007:30)

Available data from 44 Education Systems that participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006 indicate that the policy on age of entry to Grade 1 varies; from five to eight. The PIRLS 2006 also revealed that in majority of the Education Systems (27) the policy on age of entry to primary school is six. Likewise, most European countries have a compulsory school starting age of six and six is also the most common school starting age world-wide (Dhuey 2016:2; Sharp 2002:18).

According to Dhuey (2016:1) the school entry age has been decreasing around the world. The United Kingdom has a younger school starting age of five. Northern Ireland has the lowest compulsory school starting age (from four years and two months) (Sharp 2002:18). However, in most states in the United States, learners must reach their sixth birthday before they are eligible to enter Grade 1 (Prince Edward Island Department of Education 2002:1).

In some contemporary education systems, because of a single annual cut-off date, all children born in a given year are enrolled in school at the same time. For example, in Italy children turning six by the 31st December have to begin school in September of the relevant year (Ponzo & Scoppa 2011:1). Thus, in the same class, learners who are born in the early months of the year are significantly older than learners born in the later months. Younger learners who not yet have an adequate level of maturity, may experience more difficulties concentrating and learning and may accrue less skills during the time spent at school. The problem becomes exacerbated particularly if the initial disadvantages of younger learners are not negated as time progresses. Initial lower achievement can have long term consequences affecting employment opportunities. On the other hand, in Norway, children must start school in the year they turn seven (Black, Devereux & Salvanes 2008:19). A seven-year-old is perceived to be better equipped to participated in a formal classroom setting.

According to the Government Gazette, Vol. 400, No. 19377 (1998:1), in South Africa, the statistical age norm per grade is the grade number plus 6. For example: Grade 1 + 6 = age 7. This implies that a learner should be admitted to Grade 1 if he or she turns seven in the course of that calendar year. Accordingly, a learner who is younger than this age may not be admitted to Grade 1. This policy on age requirements for admission to an ordinary public school came into effect on 1 January 2000 and was amended more than a decade ago. Presently, the admission age of a learner to a public school is five years turning six by 30 June in the year of admission, for Grade 1 (Department of Education 2009:1). Parents may, however, choose to admit their children in Grade 1 at a slightly older age, namely six turning seven in the year of admission to Grade 1 (Department of Education 2009:1). The amendment of the policy on age of admission to Grade 1 resulted in a substantial improvement in access to education for five-and six-year-olds. By 2009, 78% of five-year-olds and 95% of 6-year-olds were registered in an educational institution (Taylor 2011:10). This policy creates a more heterogenous class in terms of age, maturity and ability level which in turn impacts on curriculum planning and management.

The implication of the amended policy relates to Gray's (1985:2) two diverse perspectives on determining when it is appropriate to enroll a child in Grade 1. The first implied perspective of the amended policy is to enroll the child in Grade 1 when the child reaches a certain age (that is, five years turning six by 30 June in the year of admission) and thereafter provide an educational programme that can successfully meets the child's needs. However, the over-rigorous pace and rigid structure of the present South African Grade 1 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) is challenging for young learners at the beginning of their formal schooling (Govender & Hugo 2018:29) and the concern of Grade 1 educators is that the learners are not ready for the current curriculum (Bruwer, Hartell & Steyn 2014:22). In addition, Kern and Friedman (2008:10) found that early school entry was generally associated with worse outcomes including lower math performance, less overall education, some maladjustment at midlife, increased alcohol use, and a higher mortality risk. Yet, studies comparing age and school effects suggest that educational interventions found in schools contribute more to children's cognitive competencies overall than does maturation, and that relatively young children benefit from school as much as relatively older children (Stipek 2003:3).

The second implied perspective of the amended policy is to delay the entry of a child to Grade 1 (that is, six years turning seven years in the year of admission to Grade 1) until the child is able to some degree perform the tasks that are typical of Grade 1. This practice of intentionally postponing or delaying an age-eligible child's Grade 1 entry by a year

is generally referred to as 'academic redshirting' (Huang & Invernizzi 2012:431). Academic redshirting is often done in order to provide some additional time for social, intellectual or physical maturation (Dalton 2011:17). In North Carolina, delayed entry (redshirting) is quite common, especially for children who would be the youngest in their class if they started Grade 1 when they were age-eligible (Cook & Kang 2018:17). A delay in Grade 1 enrolment is likely to have the most favourable effect when the legislated school entry age is low. When the legislated entry age is already high, such a delay is more likely to induce an unfavourable impact (Buddelmeyer & Le 2011:15).

As early as 1969, it was found that the scholastic development rates of late-entrant learners were faster than the scholastic development rates of early-entrant learners (Ilika 1969:10-11; Gray 1985:10). This trend appears to continue in the 21st century. An analysis of the reading levels of Grade 1 learners by age and school type in India revealed that older children had a definite advantage in learning (Banerji 2013:6). When the cohort that was in Grade 1 in 2009, moved to Grade 3 in 2011 and Grade 5 in 2013, was compared, it was found that the learning disadvantages of the youngest children in the cohort that was visible in Grade 1 persisted over time.

A child who starts school at a later or an older age has advantages in primary education, which can continue into adulthood. Older learners tend to be more socially, intellectually, and developmentally advanced than their younger counterparts, and thus they are better equipped to handle the pressure of a formal academic setting (Piper 2010:31). Moreover, a one-year delay in Grade 1 entry reduces the probability of grade repetition by approximately 66 percent and the likelihood of first grade retention (Buddelmeyer & Le 2011:15; McEwan & Shapiro 2008:26). On the other hand, children who begin school older are more likely to drop out of school, a clearly undesirable consequence of redshirting (Cook & Kang 2018:18).

Both implied perspectives concede that a child's development age may be different from his or her chronological age. A child's developmental age is usually viewed in terms behaviour that is apposite to the norm of a specific age group. Thus, the connotation may be for example, where a child's chronological age is six, but his or her physical development may be characteristic of that of most three-year-olds. This will certainly impact on the child's readiness for formal schooling. The uniqueness of each child and the great variations in physical development of children in the same age cohort pose a challenge for parents when deciding on their children's admission to Grade 1.

Although there is uncertainty among many parents with regard to determining when to admit their children in Grade 1 - as soon as they are age-eligible or redshirt them to increase their probability of success (Stipek 2003:1), anecdotal evidence suggests there are also many parents who are eager to enroll their children in Grade 1 based on the assumption that their children are ready when they are age-eligible. A contributing factor could be the perception that differences in academic scores are imperceptible between younger and older learners in the same grade. Furthermore, the emotional well-being of young learners is often not considered in determining school readiness and academic outcomes. There is frequently a lack of consultation with the Grade R and Grade 1 educators regarding the learners' school readiness and transition to a more formal setting. In addition, the implementation and pace of a rigorous Foundation Phase Curriculum in South Africa, especially for the first two terms of Grade 1, exacerbates the learners' transition from Grade R to Grade 1 (Govender & Hugo 2018:29).

It is also possible, because of loopholes in the minimum age regulations, that some parents enroll their children a year early (Cook & Kang 2018:2). In Indonesia, for example, the official age of school entry is seven years. However, empirical evidence suggests that majority of the Indonesian children have already entered school before their seventh birthday; in some instances, even two years early (Barakat & Bengtsson 2018:203). This practice is referred to as 'greenshirting' (Cook & Kang 2018:2). Children who are underage for their grade perform worse than children who are of age or slightly older (Piper 2010:31). Contrarily, In Bangladesh, the official age of entry to Grade 1 is six, however, 80 percent of the children enrolled in Grade 1 in 2007 were overage and among them 23,3 percent were overage by more than two years (Hossain 2010:2).

School Readiness

Academic success is dependent on being ready to learn and successfully participate in a school programme (Ackerman & Barnet 2005:1). Yet, it is difficult to define 'school readiness' and there is no single, clear-cut definition of the term (Australian Council for Educational Research 2016:10) owing to the learners' diverse Grade R educational experiences, irregular development, and children entering Grade 1 with widely varying skills, knowledge and levels of preparedness (Ackerman & Barnet 2005:1). Parents and educators also have differing expectations of what children should know and be able to do before starting Grade1. Parents emphasise academic skills more than child behaviours when making decisions about school readiness (Diamond, Reagan & Bandyk 2000:99). Educators place more emphasis on children's social ability compared to their development of academic skills (Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell 2003:233). However, Rahmawati, Tairas and Nawangsari's (2018:208) study showed that both educators and parents shared similar perceptions regarding the factors that influence school readiness. Both groups stressed cognitive factors such as

reading, writing, and calculating skills, and noncognitive factors such as social skills and the ability to control emotions. Cognitive factors were regarded as being more important than noncognitive factors.

Van Zyl (2004:149-152) asserts that physical, cognitive, affective, normative, social, cultural, literacy and situational readiness are crucial when children enter school. However, non-cognitive skills such as motivation, effort, self-regulatory learning, self-efficacy, academic self-concept, antisocial behaviour, coping, resilience, physical skills, independence, effective communication skills, and the ability to adapt, ask questions, cooperate with peers, and respect people and property, should also be considered when discussing school readiness (Rosen, Glennie, Dalton, Lennon & Bozick 2010:1; Bruwer, Hartell & Steyn 2014:25). Accordingly, a child who is ready for school has the basic minimal skills and knowledge in a variety of domains that will enable the child to function successfully in a school setting, both academically and socially (Britto 2012:9; Hair, Halle, Terry-Hume, Lavelle & Calkins 2006:432). In contrast, learners who lack readiness, experience difficulty performing activities, become tired and bored easily, forget what they have learned, and find it difficult to concentrate (Ari 2021:1045, 1046).

Dockett and Perry (2009:25) reject the notion of individual children being labelled ready or not, in favour of a collaborative approach that seeks to identify and build on the strengths of the child, school, family and community, while also identifying areas where transformation and support are required. Thus, school readiness can be viewed as being multidimensional and is not only dependent upon the skills and knowledge that children bring to the learning experiences, but also dependent upon the contexts (home and school environments and the community) in which learning occurs (Hair et al. 2006:432). It, therefore, incorporates all aspects of a child's life that contribute directly to the child's ability to learn and function successfully in school. Children will not enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support their physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development (Rhode Island Kids Count 2005:7).

School readiness is concerned with three interlinked dimensions: ready children, ready schools and ready families (Britto & Limlingan 2012:3). The 'ready children' dimension focuses on children's learning and development (Britto & Limlingan 2012:4) and demonstrates their capacity to learn. The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) highlighted five dimensions of children's school readiness in their report: physical well-being and motor development, which includes health factors and gross and fine motor abilities; social and emotional development, which encompasses social skills, self-confidence, and the ability to establish stable, caring relationships; approaches to learning, which entails curiosity, independence, cooperativeness and task persistence; language development, which refers to the ability to communicate with peers and adults; and lastly, cognition and general knowledge, which includes problem-solving skills and general information (Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp 1995:3-4). All these domains of child development are interrelated (Rhode Island Kids Count 2005:62). Healthy social-emotional development is the foundation for cognitive development. Physical development can strongly affect language and literacy skills. In characterising school readiness, each of the five dimensions is necessary but not sufficient (Hair, Halle, Terry-Hume, Lavelle & Calkins 2006:433).

The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework lists eight dimensions of school readiness: language development, literacy, mathematics, science, creative arts, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and physical health and development (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2003:5-8). Unlike the NEGP's definition, the Head Start Framework uses terminology more aligned with academic subjects of elementary school. Emergent literacy includes prerequisite skills for the development of reading and writing. Such skills include an interest in books and stories, print awareness (understanding that text represents spoken words), understanding that stories follow a standard sequence, and emergent writing (Hair et al. 2006:433).Children who are ready for formal learning, will be able to concentrate during lessons, behave appropriately in a classroom setting, co-operate with their teachers and peers, and understand the concepts taught in the early grades. Consequently, these children will have an advantage when starting school because they have a strong foundation on which they can build.

The 'ready schools' dimension focuses on the school environment (Britto & Limlingan 2012:4), which fosters relationships with families and communities (Australian Council for Educational Research 2016:10). Children entering Grade 1 vary in their early experiences, knowledge, language, culture and family background. Schools must be able to respond to a diverse range of abilities with any group of children, and the curriculum in the early grades must provide meaningful contexts for children's learning rather than focusing primarily on isolated skills acquisition (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1995:2). In order to ensure that schools are more responsive to the needs of individual learners it is imperative that educators and administrators understand how children learn and develop. They must know how to plan and implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum that places greater emphasises on child-initiated, teacher-supported learning experiences. A ready school is well resourced for child development.

The NEGP suggests 10 keys to ready schools: ready schools assist with the transition between home and school, strive for continuity between early care and education programmes in elementary schools, help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world, are committed to the success of every child, are committed to the success of every

teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day, introduce or expand approaches that have shown to raise achievement, are learning organisations that alter practices and programmes if they do not benefit children, serve children in communities, accept responsibility for results, and have strong leadership (Shore 1998:5).

The 'ready families' dimension focuses on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's learning, development and transition to school (Britto & Limlingan 2012:4), thus creating facilitative home environments (Australian Council for Educational Research 2016:10). Children's skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and settings before coming to school. Children from families that are economically secure and have healthy relationships are more likely to succeed in school (Rhode Island Kids Count 2005:6-7). Bruwer (2014:112) found that parents' lack of knowledge, poor supervision and lack of support; and learners' insufficient preschool stimulation contributed to learners performing poorly in Grade 1.

Learners who are not ready are considered to be high-risk learners in respect of school success. Parents play a vital role in this respect. Many parents are not informed about the importance of school readiness and they enroll their children in formal education settings before they are ready (Bruwer 2014:112). The school management should be responsible for ensuring that parents are informed about the importance of school readiness and that they are aware of the school curriculum. This will assist parents in making informed decisions prior to enrolling their children in Grade 1.

With regard to school readiness, transition is defined as children adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work with the sociocultural system (that is, education), and schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system, representing individual and societal diversity (Britto 2012:8). For many five-year old children, the transition from Grade R to Grade 1 can be very stressful. Children face new expectations for independence and responsibility, as well as goals that are more formal than those in Grade R. They must also learn to interact with educators in ways that centre around academic progress and must negotiate more formalised routines (Emig 2000:8). Thus, the opinion of the Grade R educator could also be an important factor when considering the child's maturity and readiness for Grade 1 enrollment.

School Readiness Assessments

A readiness test is a test used to evaluate a learner's preparedness for a specific academic programme (Shepard, Lynn & Wurtz 1998:38). Standardised school readiness instruments may not be appropriate for measuring early learning standards for particular populations of children in different geographical areas. Screening to identify children at risk was a common practice at Grade R level. Provision of appropriate educational experiences and prevention of failure were often cited as the rationale for screening programmes, with screening instruments ranging from locally developed skills checklists to standardised batteries (Graue & Shepard 1988:4). The Gesell school readiness test is based on the Gesell's theory of maturational readiness which states that behaviour develops in predictable stages that is determined by a child's internal maturational clock (Graue & Shepard 1988:5). This implies that environmental factors have relatively little impact on the rate of development and the main cause of failure among young children is purported to be inappropriate demands made on developmentally immature children (Graue & Shepard 1988:5).

Chapter 2, Section 5(2) of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (1996:B-5) emphasises that "the governing body of a public school may not administer any test related to the admission of a learner to a public school, or direct or authorise the principal of the school or any other person to administer such a test". This implies that school readiness assessments cannot be administered to children prior to entering Grade 1. However, if school readiness tests and other assessment tools are used appropriately, they can help educators design and deliver the appropriate services for individual children and can facilitate the tracking of children's status at Grade R entry and later on (Emig 2000:5). Tests and other assessment tools can also be misused. They may result in labelling children prematurely or inaccurately. As standardised school readiness assessments have been criticised for not being appropriate for measuring early learning standards for particular populations of children in different geographical areas, the Grade R educator could assist in assessing the children's readiness for Grade 1.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Sites and Participants

This study was conducted at five English medium primary schools (School A, School B, School C, School D, and School E) in Port Shepstone, the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The participants were 13 Foundation Phase educators. Reference is made to educators in terms of Educator 1, Educator 2, Educator 3, and so forth. In the five schools that were researched there were only three male Foundation Phase educators. Twelve female educators and one male educator participated in the study. Three educators from School A, two from School B, two from School C, three from School E were interviewed. All the educators who were interviewed have



numerous years of experience teaching in the Foundation Phase; between seven and 36 years. The average years of teaching experience among the 13 educators is 20,7.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative study was used in this investigation. Interviews were used as the main strategy of inquiry. Purposeful sampling was employed to select 'information rich cases'. This was based on the researchers' knowledge of the population. Sampling was conducted simultaneously as data were collected and continued until data saturation was reached.

The semi-structured one-to-one interviews were used. An interview schedule was constructed to guide the interviews. A pilot study was conducted prior to the main investigation. Data were analysed using patterns and themes. Credibility or internal validity was achieved by carefully recording the interviews, transcribing the interviews verbatim, analysing all the data gathered, and presenting the data in a fair and unbiased manner. Participant feedback and direct quotations were used in order to achieve interpretative validity. Dependability, or consistency of the findings, was achieved as the interviews were recorded.

Ethical guidelines which include policies regarding informed consent, deception, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and caring were considered in this study. Ethical clearance was attained from the University of South Africa. Permission was obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, the principals and the School Governing Bodies of the five schools. Written consent was obtained from the participants.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data elicited from the interviews revealed that five-year-old children are 'not ready' for formal schooling. The participants emphasised that vast discrepancies in terms of physical, cognitive and emotional development exist between five-year-old learners and six- or seven-year-old learners. The study yielded the following major findings:

Physical Readiness (School Maturity)

A common view that emanated in this study was that five-year old learners were not developmentally ready for Grade 1. According to Bond (2009:2) Grade 1 educators are less likely to judge children in the newly arrived Grade one cohort as 'nearly ready' or 'ready' for formal learning, but Educator 1 emphasised that *some of them need more time to develop* and *they are not ready for formal schooling*. Educator 5 believed that *they* (referring to five-year old children) *are still not developed enough because* she *used to find them by eleven ó clock falling off to sleep, tired* and *exhausted*. Educator 8 stressed that *some of them were sleeping in class, were getting frustrated and not completing tasks. They are too young. They are definitely not ready for* school. Although the Grade 1 educators may allow for short breaks during the day, a child who constantly finds it difficult to settle down will disrupt teaching and learning.

Educators 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 reiterated that five-year-old learners are 'immature' as *they are not able to complete tasks, they take a long time to settle down, they cannot concentrate, they are unable to manage the day, they are asleep during the course of the day, they are unable to listen and they are not coping at all*. In addition, the quantity of work that has to be completed in Grade 1 does not correspond with the developmental age of a child who is five years old. As Educator 11 reported that *they are not ready because there are lots to be done in class… their minds are not well-matured*.

Because of their immaturity, Educator 9 affirmed that five-year-old learners *will not adjust* and cope with the demands of Grade 1. Educator 10 added; *and now with CAPS* (referring to the South Africa curriculum) *there are certain concepts that are so abstract that we are requiring to teach our children. They need to have a certain level of maturity in order to grasp it and five years is definitely too small.* Even though, Pehkonen, Viinikainen, Böckerman, Pulkki-Råback, Keltikangas-Järvinen, & Raitakari (2015:4) found that advantages of maturity in the early years may be ephemeral, Educator 13 was adamant that *every year* they *have examples of children* (referring to the five-year-old learners) *battling in the classroom. Children are unable to manage the day. You find they are asleep during the course of the day. They are unable to listen. They cannot concentrate and we find that those children are not coping at all.* It is clear that the general trend was one of slower development for the early entrants.

It should be acknowledged that children who are chronologically eligible to attend school may not be developmentally ready to perform school tasks successfully. The parent of the child who is viewed as 'not ready' for school should be encouraged to delay the child's entrance to Grade 1 for a year. This practice of 'redshirting' the child should not be regarded as the child been a failure but as increasing the child's chances of performing well in school and providing him or her with a competitive advantage when he or she is enrolled in Grade 1. It appears that more affluent families tend to redshirt their children and the children of low socio-economic families are restricted to grade retention prior to

testing (Dhuey, Figlio, Karbownik & Roth 2017:15). As a result, smaller relative age gaps are seen in school districts where redshirting and early grade retention are higher.

The finding that maturity is crucial in determining a child's academic achievement and readiness for Grade 1 is supported by a plethora of studies that revealed that children who began school at the age of 5 years, and 5 years and 6 months were found to get tired quickly in writing activities, to complete assigned tasks much later than the older children, were unable to work independently or in groups, had poor gross motor and fine motor skills, were unable to follow instructions, demonstrated a lack persistency and concentration, and were disobedient as a result of lack of listening skills (Aslan & Çıkar 2019:95; Bruwer 2014:112).

Cognitive Readiness

Cognitive development which refers to advances in mental processes associated with perception, memory, reasoning, problem solving, language learning, and other aspects of brain development that occur with increasing age (Rao, Sun, Wong, Weekes, Shaeffer, Young, Bray, Chen & Lee 2014:5) is a component that was consistently cited by the educators. The cognitive development of five-year-old children does not necessarily coincide with an increasing demanding Grade 1 curriculum. Educator 5 alluded to this by stating that *it's like they* (referring to five-year-olds) *can't manage and some things are too difficult for them to grasp... They got to be six years old because you'll actually see the difference. Once the child turns six, it's like a whole new child came and sat in your class.* It is clear that five-year-olds are unable to cope with the pace and requirements of the curriculum. This was also reiterated by Bruwer (2014:112), who argued that learners were struggling to cope with the demands of Grade 1 and insufficient language acquisition contributed to their poor performance. It is, therefore, clear that low chronological age of entry to Grade 1 may be a handicap, for with greater maturity these learners might achieve better results with less strain.

Bond (2009:2) found that academic success is more dependent on cognitive development than on the age of the child. Yet, a proliferation of studies has shown a strong positive relationship between a learner's cognitive development and age. Barber (2016:287-288) refers to Piaget's stages of cognitive development to demonstrate why trying to teach children literacy or numeracy, before they are cognitively ready to learn it, would not benefit them, academically. He adds that children in the early years should be engaged in more free play activities instead of completing structured and scheduled activities at school. Exposing a five-year old child to a formal classroom setting could have catastrophic consequences as relatively younger children perform significantly worse in assessments administered at school, are frequently diagnosed with learning disorders, are more likely to be labelled as 'special needs' learners, and experience greater retention (Calsamiglia & Loviglio 2019:1,37). Furthermore, a higher percentage of younger learners perform below average in reading and mathematics and a higher number of younger learners require additional educator support (Rodriguez 2016:11). On the other hand, children who begin Grade 1 at the age of six or older (seven) are more likely to have developed the skills and competencies required to thrive in a formal learning environment, tend to perform better than their younger peers who start school at the age of five, and are less likely to be retained during primary school (Hanlya, Edwards, Goldfeld, Craven, Mooney, Jorm, & Falster 2019:338; Madeira 2018:24). The notion that a learner's cognitive development is associated with the age of a learner was expressed by Educator 12 who affirmed that the learners who are lagging behind (with regard to academic outcomes) are the ones that are younger and when you see them older and more mature, they tend to perform much better.

A child who is not ready for school will not have the basic minimal skills and knowledge that will enable him or her to function successfully in a school setting. Great circumspection is required when referring to five-years-olds as being cognitively not ready for Grade 1 as the 'ready schools' dimension stresses that schools need to be more responsive to the needs of individual learners and educators must understand how children learn and develop in order to plan and implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum that places greater emphasises on child-initiated, teacher-supported learning experiences.

The question that emerges from the educators' views and the 'ready schools' dimension is: Should the South African admission policy be modified so that the minimum age at which children are eligible to enter Grade 1 is six or should the Grade 1 curriculum be transformed in order to accommodate five-year-old learners? Stipek's (2002:1) review of literature provides support for early educational experiences to promote academic competencies than waiting for children to be older when they enter school. The inference is on making schools ready for children than on making children ready for school. Stipek (2009:3) states that children of all ages are 'ready to learn'. The question is not whether a child is ready to learn, but rather what a child is ready to learn. The significant policy issues are how to provide all young children with access to educational programmes, and how to ensure that these programmes are appropriate for the children.

Another challenge experienced by the educators is that the Grade 1 classes have a combination of five-years-olds and six-year-olds. An age gap of approximately a year between learners poses a challenge for educators. As Educator 8 asserted that it's *frustrating for teachers*. She stated that *last year about eight to ten children per class were not ready*



to progress to Grade 2 and they pushed them through even though they didn't meet the requirements for promotion. The educators' views are consistent with Gray's (1985:3) review of literature that suggests that children who enter school too young are susceptible to academic failure and that approximately fifty percent of school failures could be prevented by appropriate grade placements. Furthermore, learners who enter school at a younger age are more susceptible to achieving lower scores in school subjects as the years progress than older learners in the same grade. This was reiterated by Givord (2021:13) who provides evidence from the most recent Program for International School Assessment (PISA) for six European countries which showed that learners who were the youngest at school entry achieved lower PISA scores on cognitive outcomes, at age 15. To alleviate poor learner achievement scores or retention Barber (2016:288) argues that academic skills will be acquired by children easily and more comprehensively if they are taught at the right developmental time. As early as 1963, Thomas's (1963:29) investigation showed consistently higher average achievement scores for learners who entered Grade 1 at the age of six years and three months and older than learners who entered Grade 1 at a younger age. It was found that learners who began Grade 1 between the age of 5, and 5 years and 6 months experienced difficulties with reading and writing (Aslan & Çıkar 2019:95). Thus, beginning reading instruction earlier does not translate to higher overall reading achievement in the later grades (Suggate 2009:158).

Age heterogenous groups (a combination of five-year-olds and six-year-olds) in classes also provide educators with opportunities to make comparisons between the two groups. Educator 6 reiterated that from her experience *the ones that are already six do better, especially in the first half of the year* and *the five-year-olds really battle*, and Educator 13 emphasised that *if you compare the five-year-olds to the children who came when they were six and seven there's a vast difference in their progress.* This suggests that very young learners in Grade 1 may be the ones struggling to keep up academically. The views of the educators should be considered as they are the professionals who have first-hand experience working with young learners.

Emotional Readiness

School readiness depends as much on emotional maturity as it does on scholastic ability. Although children vary greatly in their levels of emotional maturity it was clear that five-year-old learners are not emotionally mature, as Educator 5 asserted that *they are clingy, they cry for every little thing and they are playful*. Some children may cry in the first few weeks of school. This is normal and is expected, but educators will not have the time to console a tearful child every day in the school year. In his study, Louw (2021:388) has also drawn attention to the emotional immaturity of many five-year-old learners by citing educators who believed that these learners should be enrolled in Grade R and not Grade 1.

Educator 8 added that because *they cry a lot, they take very long to adjust to the classroom setting. From the beginning of the year, you start with work and by the time they settle down, well the work has passed and you have to go back. So, they sort of lag behind the others. Denham's (2006:57) study showed that educators viewed a child's readiness to learn as marked by positive emotional expressiveness, enthusiasm, and ability to regulate emotions and behaviors. Based on these assertions, for many five-year-olds, the formal classroom setting may be intimidating resulting in feelings of anxiousness. The findings of this study are reinforced by research that showed that children who entered Grade 1 between the ages of 5 and 5 years and 6 months had emotional problems or a lack of self-confidence and they had negative attitudes towards school, teachers and learning (Aslan & Çıkar 2019:96). Loss of playful activities and increased academic pressure in early childhood could result in undue stress, and mental and emotional health problems.*

Diefenbach, Schmidt, Huss, König & Urschitz (2021:10) found that the younger children in Grade 1 exhibited more attention-deficit hyperactive (ADH) symptoms compared to their older classmates. The ADH symptoms were more prevalent at the end of Grade 1, and not around school entry. The authors concluded that the evolvement of ADH during Grade 1 could be due to age at school entry-related stress factors. Gumus and Yurumez (2021:176) also observed that by lowering school entry age (from six years to five years and six months) in Turkey, frequency of ADHD diagnosis increased. The increased diagnosis of ADHD could be attributed to insufficient neurodevelopment maturity causing a disruption of academic, social and behavioural functionality (Gumus & Yurumez 2021:180). This implies that children are entering school before reaching the level of neurodevelopmental maturity required. Thus, delaying school entry for children who have not reached sufficient school maturity may prevent potential problems.

School Readiness

School readiness, as discussed earlier, is crucial in assisting learners meet the demands of the formal learning environment. By reducing the age of entry to Grade 1 from seven to five, differentiated age and readiness levels in South African schools were created. This has resulted in wider gaps between learners of different school readiness levels and has negatively impacted on learners' physical, cognitive and emotional development. Educator 7 believed that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should accept responsibility for addressing school readiness. She



affirmed that *the Government is not addressing the readiness. It's just you are at that age; you must go to school – whether you are ready or not.* It is not clear when the DBE will address this issue. Therefore, the need for Grade R and Grade 1 educators to construct a shared understanding about 'readiness' should be considered when assessing school readiness (Bond 2009:2). The role of the family, school and community's support in terms of school readiness for children, should also be considered as these are crucial in developing children's competencies.

The notion that resources such as attention span, cognitive capacity, emotional coping skills, and maturity of learners are limited when they enter Grade 1 at age five, is critical in explaining their poor academic performance. As these five-year-old learners possess limited resources, they could experience difficulty understanding the cognitively demanding language used in school. Hence, these learners would constantly be lagging behind their six-year-old or seven-year-old counterparts. They will be continuously striving to catch up with their older peers but the gap in knowledge would have increased making it even more difficult. Thus, their growth will be insufficient to compensate for the substantial early gaps.

If the NEGP and the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework of children's school readiness are applied to this study; it can be deduced that five-year-old learners are clearly not developmentally, cognitively and emotionally ready for Grade 1.

Educators' Recommendations

Although some studies do not support the position of raising the school-entry age as delayed school entry necessitates child care costs, reduces working lives, and parents have the option of delaying their children's entry to school (Buddelmeyer & Le 2011:15; Gray 1985:11); it is the view of the educators that the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) should reconsider the policy on age of entry to Grade 1. There was overwhelming support for the policy to be amended so that the age of entry to Grade 1 is six and not five. This was averred in Ari's (2014:1043) study which showed that the age of six is appropriated for starting Grade 1. On the other hand, four educators were in favour of learners entering Grade 1 at the age of seven. Educator 9 asserted that she would rather prefer the child being seven in Grade 1 because she found that children who are seven years in her class adjust far better. They are toilet trained. They can hold the pencil properly. They are able to grasp concepts much better. The whole child itself is much more adjusted at seven years old. Educator 13 reinforced this by stating that children should turn seven before entering Grade 1 because they are more mature, they perform better and they are confident in the classroom which makes the teacher and the child less stressed. Evidently, the implementation of the amended policy on age of admission to Grade 1 has negatively affected learners and educators. The educators' views correspond with research that suggests that starting school earlier than seven years of age is not beneficial socially or academically in the long run (Baber 2016:280). Thus, this study showed that educators support academic redshirting. However, if the school admission policy is amended, then academic redshirting would not be necessary.

Although chronological age is certainly not the only, or even the best, predictor of success in learning, it contributes to a learner's likelihood of readiness for formal schooling (Piper 2010:31), it establishes when the Government must provide education services and it is administratively convenient (Gray 1985:10). However, the establishment of a specific chronological entry age can present challenges. As children develop at different rates, some will satisfy the age criterion, but may not be as able as others to fulfill rigorous school requirements (Lewit & Baker (1995) in Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Hayes, Breathnach, Stafford, Carswell, Keegan, Kelleher, McCafferty, ÓKeeffe, Leavy, Madden & Ozonyia 2016:21). Also, with the individual child, physical, social, emotional, and cognitive rates may vary greatly.

The results of this study are inconsistent with some international findings that reveal that the effect of school starting age, if any, diminishes or dissipates over time. They coincide with most of the existing international evidence which demonstrates that late school entry has a significant, positive effect on schooling outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed demonstrates great variability with regard to global school admission policies. Conflicting views regarding the school age entry of children have telling implications for policy. Whether delayed entry to Grade 1 improves or worsens education outcomes is controversial. Research on early childhood development; points to a link between the chronological age of a learner and his or her readiness to meet the learning expectations of Grade 1. (Prince Edward Island Department of Education 2002:2).

This study, albeit conducted on a small scale, contributes to extant knowledge by confirming previous findings that present strong support for learners to be enrolled in Grade 1 at the age of six or seven. It is clear that the 'ready children's' dimension gained prominence among the educators as opposed to the 'ready schools' or 'ready families' dimensions. Drawing from their experiences, the educators emphasised that the learner's age plays a significant role in determining whether the learner is physically, cognitively and emotionally ready to be enrolled in Grade 1 and five-

year-old children are certainly not ready for formal schooling. Consequently, this study advocates a review of the school admission policy with regard to age of entry to Grade 1. However, auxiliary studies are required to investigate the impact of the learner's age on these aspects and readiness for Grade 1, in rural and urban areas in all the nine provinces in South Africa. Moreover, this study has shown that the age at which children should start school in South Africa should be based partly on the argument that older children would be better prepared than younger children to get the most from the increasingly academic Foundation Phase curriculum (CAPS).

Comparing outcomes for children who have delayed entry by a year with children who entered school when they were eligible could provide valuable information regarding the school admission policy in South Africa. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could be conducted with these two groups of learners and their academic progress could be tracked and compared with each successive year throughout their primary schooling. Further research could include analysing the impact of school starting age in private schools, thus expanding the analysis of this study.

School readiness is clearly important to consider. However, can school readiness be determined by policies that focus on age alone, or are individual school readiness assessments more effective in the long term? 'Arbitrarily raising the entry age would discriminate against those children who are ready for school' (Gray 1985:11). It is, therefore, recommended that a measurement tool that is appropriate for the South African context be explored to evaluate school readiness.

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