Pre-school and Primary School Teachers’ Perceptions of School Readiness in Ireland

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Abstract:

Decisions to send a child to school are often made on the basis of parents and pre-school teachers’ perceptions. There may be disparity between how pre-school and primary school teachers’ define school readiness. The primary objective of this study was to establish current pre-school and primary school teachers’ perspectives of school readiness in Ireland and to compare perspectives from both teacher groups. The research also intended to ascertain the current role occupational therapy has in school readiness and to propose how the role of Occupational Therapists could be expanded in an Irish school context.

A postal questionnaire was used to collect data. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and common themes from open-ended questions were derived through thematic analysis.

Discrepancies and commonalities between what pre-school and primary school teachers’ perceive to be the most important concepts of school readiness were highlighted. Results showed teachers from both groups hold similar perspectives. Readiness is multidimensional and should not be based solely on children’s characteristics but should include external factors and the expectations of schools.

This study indicated the need for Occupational Therapists to advocate for their role as specialists in the field, qualified to support students in making a successful transition to school.
Introduction:

The transition of children from pre-school to primary school involves huge change where new tasks, increased academic and social demands together with physical changes in their learning environment (McBryde et al 2004) must be adapted to. Children are believed to have a distinct advantage if their initial experience of school is successful (McBryde et al 2004). Readiness means different things to different people and no official definition currently exists. Ackerman and Barnett (2005) have suggested that policymakers and educators should explicitly define readiness in order to assist parents, teachers and others in preparing for school success. However, defining readiness can present significant difficulties.

In practice, decisions to send a child to school are often made on the basis of parent and pre-school teachers’ perceptions of a child’s abilities and skills required by the child for a successful transition (McBryde et al 2004; Lewit and Baker 1995). Although there is validity to this approach, there may be a tension between how they define school readiness and how it is defined by primary school teachers. In situations where there is uncertainty as to the child’s school readiness Occupational Therapists are frequently requested to assess children in determining readiness (McBryde et al 2004).

This study aims to explore:

- The perceptions of teachers’ in Ireland in relation to school readiness
- The correlation between pre-school and primary school teachers’ perceptions of the most important concepts of school readiness
- The involvement of occupational therapists in Irish schools
- The education professionals’ views on the role of occupational therapy in achieving school readiness
Literature review:

School Readiness

The construct of readiness is multifaceted, owing to its basis in early psychological developmental and learning theories on a children’s skill acquisition (McBryde et al. 2006). Until the 1970s the theory was understood more as a concept of maturity (Umek et al. 2008) and was described in terms of age or stage of development. Several researchers have noted the importance of considering all areas of development not just cognitive, language and academic skills (Dockett and Perry 2009). Child-centred factors such as health (Novello et al. 1992), temperament (Schoen and Nagle 1994), gender (Corrigan et al. 1996) and behaviour (Simner 1983) must be considered. Children do not exist in isolation; therefore readiness will also be influenced by family circumstances and home environment (Byrd and Weitzman 1994) community, school expectations (Dockett and Perry 2009) and cultural diversity (Crnic and Lamberty 1994). Pianta and La Paro (2003) adopted the following contextual definition of readiness:

“Children are ready for school when, for a period of several years, they have been exposed to consistent, stable adults, who are emotionally invested in them; to a physical environment that is safe and predictable; to regular routines and rhythms of activity; to competent peers; and to materials that stimulate their exploration and enjoyment of the world and from which they derive a sense of mastery”


This is the definition used for the purposes of this study.

There is an extensive body of research on school readiness including work by McBryde et al. (2004), Diamond et al (2000), Umek et al (2008) and Noel (2010). McBryde et al (2004) examined parents and pre-school teachers’ perceptions of school readiness in Australia. Results revealed that chronological age, task persistence and adaptable behaviours influenced both parents and teachers’ perceptions. Teacher perceptions were also influenced by gender and withdrawn and shy behaviours where present. Diamond et al (2000) using data collected from USA National Household Education Survey (1995) stated that parents viewed pre-academic skills as being more important than teachers’ did. Teachers’ believed that enthusiasm, effective communication and appropriate behaviours were most important. Umek et al (2008) investigated the influence of pre-school on school readiness in connection
with their intellectual abilities, language competence and parental education in North America. This was performed by the use of standardised assessments. Questions were also asked of the children’s parents in relation to their level of education. Results were statistically analysed and indicated that school readiness is highly correlated with language competence and intellectual abilities. This also highlighted the importance of parental education levels having an influence on the above. Noel (2010) examined pre-school teachers’ and school administrators’ perceptions of readiness in Australia. Results indicated that both groups predominantly held the same perceptions and identified the following as important socio-emotional traits, a predisposition to learning, children’s experiences, school, family, community and government. An ability to perform well in pre-academic skills was not seen to be largely related to school readiness.

**The Irish Context**

Most children in Ireland start their formal education in Junior Infant class primary school (equivalent to kindergarten) at the age of 4 or 5 years. Legally, children can be enrolled from the age of 4 upwards and must have started their formal education by 6 years of age (Citizens Information 2011). Although the usefulness of chronological age as a measure of school readiness has been strongly disputed (Meisels 1999), it remains the sole criterion for school entry in many countries (Narahara and Lass 1998). Prior to formal education The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme provides a year of free early care and education for children of pre-school age in Ireland (Citizens Information 2010). Not all children attend pre-school, its uptake is optional.

The culture of pre-schools and primary schools are often very different. The two educational services have developed independently of each other and can vary widely in their objectives and approaches to education. Provision of early childhood education takes a variety of forms, for example, nurseries and crèches, private or community playgroups, Montessori schools, or Naíonraí (Irish speaking or bilingual playgroups) (O’Kane and Hayes 2006).

Little research currently exists on this topic in an Irish context (O’Kane and Hayes 2006; Ojala 2007; Kiernan et al 2008). It has been suggested that teachers’ may have a limited awareness of the role of occupational therapists (OTs) within the school (Jackman and Stagnitti 2007). This research aims to determine what awareness teachers’ currently have of
the role of occupational therapy and its function in school readiness in Ireland. While simultaneously, assisting OTs in gaining an understanding of the complexities of school readiness.
**Methodology:**

*Data collection*

A postal questionnaire, designed by the researcher, containing fifteen questions was used to gather data. The research question is comparative in nature and a quantitative approach was taken allowing statistical comparisons to be made. Data was achieved by means of scaling (Punch 2005). Answers were requested on a 3-point Likert Scale, numbering 1 to 3 with 1 being most important. Quantitative research, however, is somewhat interventionist as concepts and structures are imposed on the data by the researcher (Punch 2005).

Therefore, some qualitative elements, by means of six open-ended questions, were included to add a dimension that quantitative data does not obtain. This allowed individual responses to be better understood. Common themes were derived through thematic analysis. By using the two approaches the scope, depth and power of the research were increased (Punch 2005). Participants were offered an opportunity to provide information on their own terms and standardised comparisons were made, therefore the mixed approach was most suitable for this project.

*Sample:*

A convenience (rather than a representative) sample from the population of qualified pre-school and primary school teachers’ was employed in this study. Teachers’ were presently employed in Irish schools and teaching within an Irish context. Gender, age and ethnicity of teachers were irrelevant to this sample.

Teachers acquainted to the Researcher were contacted electronically. Contacts were fully informed about the purpose of the research and how the information would be used. There was no obligation to participate. All contacts agreed to receive a research pack by post, containing information sheets, stamped addressed envelopes and school readiness questionnaires. Purposeful snowball sampling resulted as the information was distributed to teachers in their schools and communities. This method of recruiting participants was chosen rather than contacting school principals for two reasons. Firstly, to ensure that participants took part of their own free will. Secondly, to ensure that the values and operations of the principal and school systems within which participants are employed would not infringe on the answers provided by participants.
Ethics:
An ethics application form was submitted to the Clinical Therapies Research Ethics Committee (CTREC) and approval granted. Confidentiality was guaranteed and all participants received and returned questionnaires by post. Participants did not disclose on questionnaires their own names or the name of the school in which they were employed. Names and identities of participants initially contacted were not disclosed by the student researcher. Autonomy was provided as participants were responsible for completing the questionnaire at their leisure. It was not time consuming (approximately 15 to 20 minutes).

Data Analysis:
Data collected was compared to see if correlation exists between pre-school and primary school teachers’ perceptions of school readiness. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and both contributed to the findings of the research in different ways. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 2. As the study sought to survey respondents’ views, descriptive statistics were extracted to quantify responses such as frequency distribution. Crosstabs were used to quantify yes/no answers. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to interpret qualitative data.
Results:

Demographics:
It was proposed that in order to obtain enough data to be statistically significant, a target of 20 primary school teachers and 20 pre-school teachers was decided upon. This target was achieved. All respondents (100%) were female. There was a wide range of experience among participants. Respondents were not asked to disclose the service’s pre-school qualification level, as this was not relevant to the current study. The results of a breakdown of teacher demographics are shown in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1: Demographics of pre-school teachers’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-school</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Median</td>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years qualified</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years working as a teacher</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years working in current school</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Demographics of primary school teachers’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary school</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Median</td>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years qualified</td>
<td>18.05</td>
<td>18.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>37.00</td>
<td>13.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years working as a teacher</td>
<td>16.25</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>12.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years working in current school</td>
<td>12.15</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>12.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years working in Junior/Senior infants</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>5.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The age bracket within which teachers fell under is displayed in Chart 1.
Chart 1: Breakdown of teachers class by age

No. of participants

Age bracket

- Junior infants
- Senior infants
- Mixed junior and senior
- Preschool

Quantitative data: child characteristics

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse and compare primary and pre-school teachers’ perceptions of the most important aspects of school readiness.

Participants were asked to select what they perceived as the most important characteristic from the list provided. The results obtained are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: The most important child characteristics in determining school readiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. 1 most important</th>
<th>No. 2 most important</th>
<th>No. 3 most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronological age</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self control</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention skills</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication/language</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor skills</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronological age</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self control</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication/language</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor skills</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most important characteristics of children as defined by both groups are communication and language competence, socio-emotional competence, independence, self control and social skills. Conversely, 30% of primary school teachers’ believe that chronological age is the most important child characteristic in determining school readiness.
Child characteristics such as motor skills, self-care skills, pre-academic skills and best means of learning for children were expanded.

The most important motor skills according to respondents are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: The most important motor skill for school readiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-school teachers</th>
<th>No. 1 most important %</th>
<th>No. 2 most important %</th>
<th>No. 3 most important %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fine motor</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross motor</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postural stability</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual-motor ability</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor planning</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to pre-school teachers’ all motor skill attributes are important for school readiness; with fine motor being the most important and visual motor ability (copying what is seen) the least important aspect. On the contrary, primary school teachers’ believe postural stability (ability to sit still and stand still or move without falling) to be the most important and motor planning (executing well planned co-ordinated movements even in unknown tasks) the least important aspect. However, it can be understood from the results that gross motor, fine motor and postural stability are the most important motor skills according to participants.

In terms of self-care skills, the results obtained are also outlined in Table 5.
Table 5: The most important self-care skill for school readiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-school teachers</th>
<th>Primary school teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. 1 most important</td>
<td>No. 2 most important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet training</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose care</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Feeding</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressing</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School desk maintenance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing out papers/treats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most important self-care skills as defined by both groups are toilet training, self feeding (including use of utensils, opening lunch box and milk cartons, pouring liquid into cups) and dressing (putting on and taking off e.g. gloves, scarves, hat, jacket/hanging up jacket).

In terms of pre-academic skills the results obtained are outlined in Table 6. One pre-school teacher failed to complete this section; therefore, number 2 and 3 are based on 19 answers.
The most important pre-academic skills as defined by pre-school teacher respondents are social play, attention to tasks, following directions and sensorimotor play. Primary school teachers’ held similar perceptions in terms of following directions, attention to tasks and sensorimotor play. Differences arose where pre-school teachers’ choose social play and primary teachers’ constructional play as important.

In terms of best methods of learning the results obtained are outlined in Table 7.
Learning through play and doing were the most important as defined by both groups. Learning through listening and observing/watching were also highlighted in the top three indicating the relevance of all methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. 1 most important</th>
<th>No. 2 most important</th>
<th>No. 3 most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>Learning through:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers</td>
<td>play</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>doing</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>observing</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>Learning through:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers</td>
<td>play</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>doing</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>listening</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>observing</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative data: external factors

Participants were asked if they believed that external factors such as family circumstances, home environment, school environment and cultural diversity affected school readiness. 100% of participants agreed with this statement. The most common themes which emerged from both groups included

(A) Home Environment
“difficult home life for children and parents affects the children’s emotional well-being which can be one of the main influences on how children learn”
“child will be more ready for school if they have a stimulating, engaging and print rich environment at home”
“a child that is happy at home will always be more contented coming to school”

(B) Parental Involvement (or lack thereof)
“It is always apparent in school the children who have interested, pro-active parents who do work and spend time on their children”
“Some children will have a lot of parental involvement prior to school which will benefit them greatly”

Other themes which emerged less frequently from both cohorts included:

(C) Social Interaction with peers and other adults
“opportunities to interact and socialise ..... more ready for school”

(D) Culture and Language
“if cultural diversity affects a child to the extent of non ability to communicate or integrate therefore school readiness is affected”

In comparison, one pre-school teacher stated:

“I think the child that should be ready for school should have the support from home and be confident in school no matter from what culture”.

Primary school teachers’ reported that the parent’s attitude towards school may have a positive or negative effect on a child’s school readiness
“Negative attitudes towards school in the household can directly relate to a child’s willingness to attend”.

This was not indicated by pre-school teachers’. This cohort felt that the availability and uptake of pre-school can positively affect readiness.

Participants were asked if they agreed with the following statement:

“the expectation of individual teachers and the school system in which the child must function has a part to play in determining school readiness”

75% of primary and 90% of pre-school teachers’ agreed with this statement. This difference is not statistically significant.

However, conflicting themes arose between both groups. Pre-school teachers’ felt that individual teachers may have different expectations and therefore different standards of readiness and the curriculum should be tailored to meet the child’s needs.

“every individual teacher will have different standards of readiness”

On the contrary, the majority of primary school teachers’ felt that all teachers generally have the same expectations particularly around independence and mastery of particular tasks.

“Every junior Infants teacher will have expectations of how a child can cope independently”

It is important to note that this expectation often came about as a result of large class sizes and cultural diversity within the class. Fewer teachers’ did report that all children were accepted individually.

Qualitative data: chronological age

In Ireland, a child’s eligibility to start school is legally decided on the basis of chronological age. Participants were asked if they agreed with this concept. Two main conflicting themes emerged from both groups:

(A)It is necessary to have rules or guidelines, age is therefore a good indicator
(45% primary, 25% pre-school)
(B) Other factors should be taken into account e.g. sociocultural readiness, social skills, home, pre-school experience, mastery of tasks and emotional maturity (50% of primary, 75% pre-school).

It was suggested by 10% of pre-school teacher participants that children should be formally assessed for readiness prior to entering primary school.

**Role of occupational therapy in school readiness:**

Participants were asked a series of questions relating to the role of occupational therapy in Irish schools. 60% of primary compared to 35% of pre-school teachers’ have considered the role of OTs in supporting a successful transition to school. This difference is not statistically significant. One pre-school teacher stated:

“In most cases there should not be a need for an expert. If parents handle this transition using their common sense there should not be a problem”.

75% of primary and 55% of pre-school teachers’ were aware that OTs assessed motor performance, sensory responsiveness, perceptual processing, psychosocial and cognitive abilities and school environment. This difference is not statistically significant.

60% of primary compared to 15% of pre-school teachers’ have previously referred a child to occupational therapy services. This difference is statistically significant 0.008 with Fishers Exact test. Interestingly, one pre-school teacher noted:

“I’m not sure if occupational therapy services are available to children in pre-school”.

It is important to note, some participants have not referred but have recommended to parents that they should seek support from an OT.

45% of primary compared to 25% of pre-school school teachers’ have worked with an OT in their classroom. This difference is not statistically significant.

The main areas in which OTs have worked with teachers include:

- assess/observe the child in the classroom
- provision of a sensory or exercise programme
- suggesting equipment

In one situation a pre-school teacher stated that she links with an OT regarding a child who has “serious domestic problems”. Interestingly this particular pre-school teacher reported that she was not aware of all the areas in which OTs work.

From the total number of participants who had not previously worked with an OT, one pre-school teacher felt that she could not see a role for an OT in her school. The remainder could see the benefit for a child with needs, the rest of the class and the teacher. It is important to note, that some teachers’ stated that they have no current need for an OT but “would see a role for an Occupational Therapist in previous classes” and “they can see how they would be of great assistance”. Interestingly, one pre-school teacher stated “I never would have considered it before as I never realised Occupational Therapists worked with children but I would now”.
**Discussion:**

This study examined the differences in pre-school and primary school teachers’ perceptions of school readiness in Ireland.

**Concepts of School readiness in Ireland**

Results from this study indicate that both groups hold similar perspectives on the most important concepts of school readiness. The most important child characteristics identified by both groups included communication and language competence, socio-emotional competence, independence, self-control and social skills. These findings are similar to previous findings (Rimm-Kaufman et al 2000; Diamond 2000; O’Kane and Hayes 2006; Ladd et al 2006; Thompson 2002; Dockett and Perry 2004; Noel 2010). In this study academic knowledge was not seen to be largely related to school readiness by both groups. This is consistent with available literature (Dockett and Perry 2001; O’Kane and Hayes 2006; Noel 2010). McBryde et al (2004) stated that teachers’ perceptions were significantly influenced by gender. Teachers’ perceived girls more favourably than boys (Angenent and de Man 1989). In this study neither group placed emphasis on gender as a determining factor.

To provide more in-depth analysis, attributes of motor skills, self-care skills and pre-academic skills were expanded. As expected, both groups were in agreement that toilet training, self-feeding and dressing were the most important self-care skills. Both groups highlighted attention to tasks, following directions and sensorimotor play as the most important pre-academic skills. Discrepancies did arise however. Pre-school teachers’ deemed social play as a fundamental skill whereas primary teachers’ considered constructional play within the top three. Both groups deemed fine motor, gross motor and postural stability as the most important motor skills. The significant amount of time spent performing fine motor tasks, and the effect a difficulty in this area can have on a student, makes fine motor skills a critical component in a child’s overall development (Jackman and Stagnitti 2007).

Disparity was also noted where primary school teachers’ placed greater emphasis on chronological age as a principal determinant. This finding is consistent with qualitative data
of this study where a quarter of pre-school respondents, compared to almost a half of primary school teachers’ agreed that a child is deemed ready for school by means of chronological age. O’Kane and Hayes (2006) found that 77% of primary and 80% of pre-school teachers’ agreed that basing the decision to start school on age rather than individual preparedness causes barriers to successful transitions. Similarly, 75% of preschool teachers’ in this study believed other factors should be considered.

McBryde et al (2004) also suggested that decisions made on the basis of chronological age alone should be discouraged among health and educational personnel. However, their study found that parent and teachers’ perceptions was significantly predicted by chronological age. The use of age as a determining factor for school readiness remains debatable. A lack of agreement exists on the abundant research on entrance age and school success (Ackerman and Barnett 2005). This contrasting research indicates that age alone is not an ideal predictor. Other factors such as family, school and community, as well as children’s experience should also be considered (Dockett and Perry 2009). This was also suggested by respondents of this study. However, Narahara and Lass (1998) reported that most researchers according to the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp 1987) were in agreement that chronological age is the only unbiased criterion; teachers need to provide a curriculum that addresses individual developmental and academic differences. They felt that labelling a child ‘not-ready’ and excluding the child may result in the child falling farther behind.

Corroborating with other literature, this study found that both groups deemed external factors such as home environment, parental living situations and commitment, child experiences and culture (100% of participants) and individual teacher and school expectations (82.5% of participants) significant to school readiness (Ackerman and Barnett 2005; Kiernan 2008; Dockett and Perry 2009; Noel 2010).

Research in North America has shown a significant achievement gap already exists between low-income children and their more affluent peers at kindergarten entry (Daily et al 2011). In Ireland, Kiernan et al (2008) found that half of the children assessed for cognitive abilities and socio-emotional competence, from a designated disadvantaged area, were ready for school and half were not.
Noel (2010) emphasized the role of families in supporting children’s school readiness, the positive impact that a rich family environment can have and the importance of communicating the positive values of schooling, which was also a finding in this study. In contrast, McBryde et al (2004), found a non-significant result for home environment. However, this may have been a reflection of the research sample as participants in that study were self-selected.

Children’s experience prior to school was also indicated. This experience included pre-school attendance and social interaction with peers and adults. This is consistent with findings in the literature (Noel 2010). Ackerman and Barnett (2005) noted that readiness can be enhanced through effective pre-school education. Pre-school teacher respondents also felt that individual teachers’ may have different expectations and therefore different standards of readiness. Ackerman and Barnett (2005) also reported that teacher’s perceptions of the demands of kindergarten can play a role in determining readiness.

This study addressed the concept of the relationship between children and their attended school and expectations of teachers’ (McBryde et al 2004). Because different schools and teachers’ have different expectations and requirements, children who may be considered ready for one school might be judged unready for another (Dockett and Perry 2009). In North America, the US National Education Goals Panel (1997) emphasised the importance of ready schools. This concept which has appeared in the literature (Dockett and Perry 2009) is perhaps one which should be considered more widely in Irish society. A participant of this study suggested that parents should choose a school that suits their style and priorities. Powell (2010) suggested that perhaps the way schools are organised, contributes to the confusion around readiness. Within each classroom a range of abilities and thresholds exist that certain skills are necessary to cope. Otherwise children may struggle in a school context. In flexible school systems, designed to accommodate all children a child’s readiness may not be an important issue (Lewit and Baker 1995).

Assessing for readiness is not currently undertaken in Ireland and although this concept was not addressed in this study two pre-school teacher respondents made reference to it. In some parts of North America this practice is commonplace. The validity of readiness assessments is questionable. The external factors mentioned previously raise questions in relation to assessment. Furthermore, assessment is time consuming and expensive and its use for
deciding on school commencement or postponement is questionable (Narahara and Lass 1998).

May et al (1994) found that age eligible children in North America who were deemed unready by assessment but whose parents made the decision to send them to school performed as well as their classmates. Ackerman and Barnett (2005) reported that little attention is paid to the environmental factors that limit readiness when a child is deemed ‘not ready’. This results in the child making little progress during the year out. In many Australian schools, general checklists developed by teachers, regions or school systems are used to gauge children’s skills and understandings of areas deemed to be important (Dockett and Perry 2009). Perhaps this is a concept which may be utilised in an informal way in Ireland.

**Implications for Occupational Therapy:**

The areas highlighted in this study in which OTs have previously worked in schools include observation/assessment, provision of school programmes and equipment for children in the classroom. Limited involvement of therapists in transition planning suggests that teachers’ may have an insufficient understanding of the contributions of OTs. It is therefore apparent that there is a need for OTs to advocate for their role in supporting children and families in making a successful transition to school at both an organisational and an individual level in Ireland. This study was successful in promoting this role on a small scale as highlighted by teachers’ responses.

Research suggests (Rodger and Ziviani 2006 p.228; McBryde et al 2004) that traditionally OTs tend to adopt a maturationist approach. Prigg (2002) found the most common roles OTs played in transition to school were: preparing the child for school (identifying activities a child may have difficulties with at school), working with school personnel and providing parental support (assisting parents with decisions about what type of school their child should attend). Participants of Prigg’s (2002) study reported using a combination of remediation, compensatory and adaptive treatment approaches.

The broadening of the conceptualisation of school readiness to an ecological view, emphasising the importance of environmental context, has paralleled a shift in occupational
therapy practice (McBryde et al 2004). McBryde et al (2004) suggests that OTs need to consider not only a child’s skill, but also contextual influences such as the home environment, school environment, expectations of the teacher, temperament and behaviour. Results from this study also indicate this. McBryde et al (2004) suggested that it may be necessary to empower parents to assess a variety of schools ensuring a good fit to the child. This is consistent with findings in this study. It is imperative that OTs work closely with the child prior to entry to school to ensure the best placement for the child.

“Optimal occupational performance is achieved when the fit between the child, environment and occupation is maximised”

(Primeau and Ferguson 1999, p.509).

An important aspect of transition practice is that therapists, educational personnel and families collaborate in decision-making (McBryde 2004; Prigg 2002). Humphrey (1989) discussed the role of therapists as not only improving the occupational role of the child but also improving the feelings of adequacy of the child’s parents.

Limitations and Recommendations for future use:
This study did not address current levels of communication between teachers from both groups. O’Kane and Hayes (2006) found that communication between both teacher groups was low but both were open to greater levels of communication. Prigg (2002) reported that OTs encountered barriers in practice, such as feeling uncomfortable in the classroom and poor uptake of recommendations within the classroom. Communication between both teacher groups; and communication between occupational therapy and education workers would enhance services for children. Further investigation is required.

Because of the low number of participants in this study, findings cannot be generalised to the Irish teacher population, larger-scale research is needed.

Investigation is also needed to determine whether or not increasing the awareness of teachers’ in regard to occupational therapy services would in fact increase the access and referral of students with transition difficulties to these services.
**Conclusion:**

This study set out to explore pre-school and primary school teachers’ perceptions of school readiness in Ireland and to compare these perceptions. It also aimed to determine what awareness teachers’ in Ireland currently have of the role of occupational therapy and its function in school readiness. Findings from this short study indicate that, primary and pre-school teachers’ have similar perceptions of the most important concepts of school readiness in Ireland.

To summarise, communication and language competence, socio-emotional competence, independence, self-control and social skills are the most important child characteristics in determining readiness. However, readiness should not be based solely on children’s characteristics but should include external factors such as the home environment, family, children’s experience and the expectations of schools. This also has implications for occupational therapy intervention.

In Ireland readiness is not formally assessed. Research indicates that this practice is flawed. An alternative option to assessment may be the use of informal checklists. No agreement can be reached regarding the use of chronological age as a determining factor. A shift in focus from ‘ready children’ to ‘ready schools’ may therefore be beneficial in Ireland.

Findings of this study raise the issue that OTs may need to advocate for their role as specialists in the field. In doing so OTs are increasing the likelihood that students experiencing difficulties will be provided with the best support available to them in order to maximise their educational opportunities. School teachers’ are in a position to refer children to occupational therapy. Unless teachers’ are aware that support is available, it is unlikely that these students will access services. Occupational therapists can create the opportunities for children to flourish to their full potential, and encourage their participation in the occupational roles that are so important to being a student.
References:


Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet
Participant Information Sheet

I am currently a student of the M.Sc. Occupational Therapy programme in the University of Limerick. I am undertaking a research project pertaining to the concept of school readiness. For the purposes of this study I require a total of twenty primary school teachers and twenty pre-school teachers to complete a short questionnaire at their leisure. Questionnaires do not have to be signed by participants and can be returned anonymously, stamped addressed envelopes are provided. By completing the questionnaire you are consenting to be involved in this research. It is important to note all participants may withdraw from the research at any time.

Confidentiality can be assured to all participants as names of participants and names and locations of schools do not have to be entered onto questionnaires. There will be no face to face contact between participants and student researcher and all correspondence is by means of post.

If you or any other member of your staff requires further information regarding this study or if you wish to receive a copy of the completed research article, you can contact me by email at 10000826@studentmail.ul.ie or by using one of the stamped addressed envelopes enclosed.

Ethical approval for this research has been sought and if further information is required the principal investigator for this project can be contacted at judi.pettigrew@ul.ie.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Maria Donnelly
Appendix B

School Readiness Questionnaire
School readiness questionnaire

Section 1:
Please specify if you currently work as a:

Pre-school teacher ________ Primary school teacher ________
If yes what grade ________

• Please state the number of years you have been qualified: ________
• Please indicate the number of years you have being working as a teacher: ________
• Please indicate the number of years you have being working in your current school: ________
• Please indicate the number of years you have being working in Junior/Senior infants: ________
• Are you male / female
• Please indicate which age bracket you fall under: 20 – 25
  25 – 35
  35 – 45
  45 – 55
  55 – 65
Section 2:

In the following questions please number 1 to 3 what you consider to be the three most important, with 1 being the most important and 3 least important (of the three) in terms of school readiness

Q1. Which of the following do you believe are the three most important in determining school readiness:

Chronological age
Gender
Social skills (interaction with other children)
Socio-emotional competence
Independence
Self control, peer relationships, ability to follow directions
Attention skills
What the child knows e.g. colours, numeracy, literacy, shapes
Communication/language competence
Motor skills

Q2. In terms of motor skills, please indicate order of importance which you feel are the three most important skills for school readiness

Fine motor skills (small hand and finger movements)
Gross motor skills (large body movements, balance and ball skills)
Postural stability (ability to sit still and stand still or move without falling)
Visual-motor ability (copying what is seen)
Motor planning (executing well planned co-ordinated movements even in unknown tasks)
Q3. Which do you believe are the three most important in terms of self-care?

Toilet training/Hand washing
Nose care
Self feeding (including use of utensils, opening lunch box and milk cartons, pouring liquids into cups)
Dressing (putting on and taking off e.g. gloves, scarves, hat, jacket)/ hanging up jacket
School desk maintenance
Passing out papers/treats

Q4. Which of the following pre-academic tasks do you believe to be the most important three?

Pencil and paper tasks: forming letters and numbers
Colouring
Cutting
Attention to tasks
Sitting in a group
Following directions
Asking for help
Completing tasks
Sensorimotor play
Constructional play
Social play with peers
Q5. In terms of educating children, indicate in order of importance

Learning through play (including role play)  ____
Learning through doing  ____
Learning through listening  ____
Learning through watching/observing (visual perception)  ____

Q6. Do you believe external factors such as family circumstances, home environment, school environment and cultural diversity affect school readiness?

Yes
No

Briefly explain you answer
Q7. Do you agree with the statement that ‘the expectations of individual teachers and the school system in which the child must function has a part to play in determining school readiness’?

Yes

No

Briefly explain your answer

Section 3:

Q8. Have you ever considered the role of the occupational therapist in supporting children and their families in making a successful transition to school?

Yes

No
Q9. In schools occupational therapists assess the following areas:

motor performance, sensory responsiveness, perceptual processing, psychosocial and cognitive abilities and school environment

Were you aware that occupational therapists assisted in the areas mentioned?

Yes
No

Q10. When a child is of school age and has difficulties in any of the above areas mentioned have you ever referred a child to occupational therapy services:

Yes
No

Q11. Did you ever work together with an occupational therapist in your school or classroom?

Yes
No
Q12. If you answered yes to question 11, what was their role and function in your situation:

Q13. If you answered no to question 11, could you see a role for an occupational therapist working with some children in your class?
Q14. Do you agree with the current situation in Ireland that a child is deemed ready for school by means of their age?

Briefly explain your answer.

Q15. Are there any other important factors in terms of school readiness that have not already been mentioned?
Acknowledgements:

I would like to sincerely thank all participants of this study.

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