

School Start Age: Three Months and Beyond, With Flexibility in The Decision to Start School¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the school starting age of 69-71 months old children according to the opinions of teachers and parents. In this qualitative study, phenomenology design was used. The study group was determined by the maximum variation sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling types. The study group included 51 participants who were closely related to the school starting process. As a result of the study, while there are positive academic and physical opinions about children who start primary school early; There are negative views on social and psychological themes. Teachers' opinions are that 69-71 months old children should not start school (76%). Parents who send their children to kindergarten for one more year are fully satisfied with their decision to start school late (100%). Parents who start their children in primary school before completing 72 months are less satisfied with their decision to start primary school early (44%).

Keywords: primary school, preschool, school starting age, teacher, parent

Okula Başlama Yaşı: Okula Başlama Kararında Esnek Bırakılan Üç Ay ve Ötesi

Özet (Türkçe)

Bu çalışmanın amacı 69-71 aylık bir çocuğun okula başlama yaşına ilişkin öğretmen ve veli görüşlerini derinlemesine incelemektir. Bu nitel çalışmada fenomenoloji deseni kullanılmıştır. Çalışma grubu amaçlı örnekleme türlerinden biri olan maksimum çeşitlilik örnekleme yöntemi ile belirlenmiştir. Çalışma grubunda okula başlama süreci ile yakından ilgili 51 katılımcı yer almıştır. Çalışma sonucunda ilkokula erken başlayan çocuklara ilişkin akademik ve fiziksel olarak olumlu görüşler varken; sosyal ve psikolojik temalarda ise olumsuz görüşler hâkimdir. Öğretmen görüşleri 69-71 aylık çocukların okula başlamamaları yönündedir (%76). Çocuklarını bir yıl daha anaokuluna gönderen velilerin okula geç başlama kararından memnuniyetleri tamdır (%100). Çocuklarını 72 ayı tamamlamadan ilkokula başlatan velilerin ilkokula erken başlama kararından memnuniyetleri düşüktür (%44).

Anahtar Kelimeler: ilkokul, okulöncesi, okula başlama yaşı, öğretmen, veli

Introduction

School is life at its core. In the school of life, there are firsts, transition processes and some special experiences that affect the whole of life. There are findings in the studies that the decisions made during the primary school process have important effects in the future (Dockett and Perry, 2001; Duncan et al., 2007; Gill, et al. 2006; Pianta et al., 2000). It is stated that primary school first grade experiences affect many areas, especially the most basic issues such as personality formation and understanding life (Gill et al. 2006).

The first grade of primary school is defined as a "passage ceremony" that initiates a miraculous adaptation process in life (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Experiences during the first grade of primary school set the tone and direction of children's future life school careers (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Therefore, the age of starting the first grade of primary school is very important in a child's life.

As one of the decisions that have important effects on life, the school starting age is carefully examined and evaluated by parents, teachers, school administrators and experts, and the most appropriate decision is targeted. Because starting school is not only dependent on the child and age. In addition, there are processes that need to be evaluated in multiple ways,

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including teachers, families, society and administrators (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). Therefore, in the process of starting primary school, school readiness tests, readiness observations, general scientific data and child-specific situations are taken into consideration. The general criterion here is that the child is ready for all possible multidimensional needs in primary school (Brown & Lan, 2015; Gündüz & Özarslan, 2017).

Summarizing the multifaceted research on the topic of school entry policies, Stipek (2002) focused on the age children need to start school and the potential benefits of delaying school entry for all or some children. In this context, (1) comparing the results of children who delayed starting school by one year with those who started school when appropriate; (2) comparing children in the same class with different birth dates; (3) children of the same age but in different classes, as well as children in the same class with a one-year difference in age were compared. In these comparisons, it is stated that the decision to be made is important because of the differences between children.

On the other hand, teachers' views on the school starting age are important. Studies have shown that teachers' attitudes towards the school starting age have a direct impact on learning and teaching processes (Brown & Lan, 2015). In order to provide an effective transition to school life, it attaches importance to the teachers' views on the phenomenon of school readiness, as well as the readiness of children for school. Therefore, the phenomenon of school readiness is not limited to children being ready for school. School, family and teachers also play an important role in the readiness phenomenon (Dockett & Perry, 2009). Teachers' contributions to school adaptation, providing a smooth transition and student success are undeniable (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000).

From another point of view, the readiness of schools is also important in the context of school starting age. While it is correct to expect children to be older when they start school, pre-school education activities can be planned to support the early education experience to improve academic competences. In other words, it is a separate necessity to focus on making schools and the school system ready for children as well as preparing children for school (Stipek, 2002). Therefore, while focusing on the child, the decision should be made by considering the conditions at the school.

According to the most up-to-date data of the Ministry of Education in Turkey; Children who have completed 69 months at the end of September of the registration year are enrolled in the 1st class. However, 69, 70 and 71 months old children can be directed to pre-school education upon written request of parents (MEB, 2023). In line with the regulation, parents can start their 69-71 month old children to primary school, while those who wish consider not starting them.

Researches revealing the opinions of parents and teachers in the context of school starting age, possible consequences and concerns about children's experiences reveal the importance of the process. In the studies, child and family characteristics, parenting styles, peer interaction, children's previous educational experiences and media/technology are stated as the main factors affecting school readiness. The importance of these factors and more in the development and implementation of a successful school initiation process is emphasized by school administrators and policy makers (Buldu & Er, 2016).

In the studies in the literature, it is stated that teachers have problems in the teaching process with students who start school before they turn 72 months. The age difference in the classroom has resulted in the need for alternative methods specific to different age groups. In addition, it was stated that students have difficulties in class and school rules, perceiving instructions, and adapting to the course duration (Yılmaz et al., 2014).

The aim of the research

In this study, the school starting age of a 69-71 month old child was examined according to the opinions of teachers and parents. The aim of the study is to reveal the perceptions of teachers and parents about the school starting age. For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What are the opinions of teachers and parents about starting primary school for students who have not completed 72 months?
2. What are the opinions of teachers and parents about students who continue to kindergarten because they have not completed 72 months?

Method

Research Design

In this qualitative study, phenomenology design was used. Phenomenological studies are an inquiry strategy applied to reveal the researcher's human experiences about a phenomenon defined by the participants. This research carried out to reveal the experiences of teachers in the context of school starting age. Therefore, it is suitable for the phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The reason for choosing phenomenology in this study; The aim of the study is to try to understand in depth how the school starting age, readiness and school readiness are perceived in different participant groups, with the real experiences of the participants. This method was used in the study in order to be able to explain the experiences of the participants about the school starting age and various expressions of these experiences. Although not completely foreign to us, phenomenology is an appropriate research method for studies that aim to investigate phenomena that we cannot fully grasp (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2003).

Participants

The study group was determined by the maximum variation sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling types. A total of 51 participants, including 12 parents, 5 kindergarten teachers and 34 classroom teachers, were involved in the study group. In this way, it is aimed to reach the most ideal data about research problems (Creswell, 2012; 2014). The seniority of the teachers participating in the study is about 3-6 years, and they are teachers who have experience in the process of starting school. 12 of the parents participating in the study were primary school parents; 3 of them are kindergarten parents.

Data Collection

In phenomenological studies, data collection is done through in-depth interviews, observations and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this research, data were collected by face-to-face and online data collection methods. Although the face-to-face interview technique is the majority, online data collection method, which has been an increasing trend in every field in recent years, has also been used (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020).

Open-ended questions and structured questions were created to obtain deep information about the phenomenon. For the questions in the interview form, the opinion of the experienced scientific expert in the field was taken and the interview form was given its final form. In addition, written permission was obtained to conduct interviews and take audio recordings. Interviews with parents were conducted face to face. Teachers' opinions were

taken online via Google forms. The open-ended semi-structured interview forms used in all interviews are listed below:

Semi-structured interview form

Kindergarten parent

- 1- How old is your child now?
- 2- What influenced your decision to attend kindergarten instead of first grade?
- 3- Are you satisfied with your child's performance in the current class?

Primary School Parent

- 1- At what age did your child start school?
- 2- What influenced the decision to start first grade?
- 3- Are you satisfied with your child's performance in the current class?

Kindergarten teacher

- 1- Are there any age differences between the students in the class?
- 2- What are your thoughts on children who attend kindergarten with the choice of their parents when they can start the first grade?
- 3- Do you think it is right for children under 72 months to attend kindergarten instead of primary school?

Class Teacher

- 1- Are there any age differences between the students in the class?
- 2- What are your thoughts on children starting the first grade before they are 72 months old?
- 3- Is it a right choice for children younger than 72 months to attend kindergarten or start the first grade?

In addition, voluntary participation approvals were obtained before the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Although the steps of data collection, analysis and reporting in qualitative research processes are inseparable, intuitive and relative, a general framework can be created with a planned study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Content analysis was used while analyzing the data. Thus, similar views were brought together within the framework of certain codes and themes and presented as an organized whole in accordance with the purpose of the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2003).

The main purpose of qualitative data analysis is to reveal the information hidden in social reality (Özdemir, 2010). For this purpose, each participant's opinion was knitted by induction method and transferred to the report in the form of categories, themes and codes. During the reporting process, the results are indicated by frequency and percentage.

Although there is no universally accepted terminology and criteria for evaluating the resulting framework, some strategies that can increase the reliability of qualitative study findings can be briefly summarized as follows (Noble & Smith, 2015): (i) The effect of personal biases on findings should be controlled. (ii) Meticulous record keeping, clear presentation of findings, and consistency and transparency in data interpretation should be ensured. (iii) To support the findings, the opinions of the participants should be included verbatim, in a plentiful and condensed manner. (iii) To reduce researcher bias, support should be sought by establishing relationships with other researchers. (iii) Data triangulation should be used, where different methods and perspectives help produce a more

comprehensive set of findings. (iiiiii) Codings should be submitted to the approval of the participants and final themes should be created.

Interviews were generally conducted face-to-face and some of them online, in a quiet environment or in conditions with minimal noise. Before the interviews, which lasted an average of 15 minutes, warm-up questions were used to help the participants relax, give more realistic answers and provide an environment of trust. The purpose of the research was explained and it was stated that the personal information of the participants would be kept confidential. After the interviews, the voice recordings were transcribed one-to-one, and the participants were asked to confirm by giving face-to-face or online feedback.

In this context, the data analysis process of the research was carried out. After the interview notes and video recordings were coded, they were shared with the participants again to prevent incomplete or misunderstanding. The final version of the coding was checked and edited by two researchers.

Findings

The findings obtained in this study, which was carried out in order to determine the opinions of teachers and parents about the school starting age, are given below under two headings.

Students starting primary school before 72 months

“What are the opinions of teachers and parents about students who start primary school before they are 72 months old?” Interviews were held with each participant regarding the problem. The responses received from all teachers and parents are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Views on students who started primary school before 72 months Write the entry here without changing the format and style.

Category	Themes	Positive Opinion		Negative Opinion	
Class Teacher 34 participants	Academic	19	%56	8	%24
	Social	6	%18	23	%68
	Psychological	2	%6	27	%79
	Physically	13	%38	11	%32
	Decision	5	%15	26	%76
Primary school parent 9 participants	Academic	2	%22	6	%67
	School perception	3	%33	5	%56
	Satisfaction	4	%44	5	%56

As expressed in Table 1, the opinions of students who started primary school before 72 months of age were divided into teacher and parent categories. While teacher opinions indicate positive academic and physical opinions; they expressed negative opinions on social and psychological themes. In addition, there was a negative result (76%) for 69-71 months old children to start school.

Based on the Table 1 data, it is seen that a 69-71 month old student should attend kindergarten for one more year instead of starting school. Classroom teachers who have

experience with these students state that there are psychological and social problems even if there are no academic and physical problems. It was stated that children who started school with the decision of being suitable for school with the cooperation of the school administration and parents faced social and psychological problems in the following years. Some of the teacher's views in this context are as follows:

I think it would be better to wait a year. If my own child were in this situation, I would definitely wait a year. Even if there is nothing, something will always be missing. I'm talking about deficiencies that will definitely leave traces in the future if we don't notice them today. class teacher 13

If it is a question of being in the middle, it is better to be late than early. Even a month is very important for a child at this age. I prefer to be ahead next year rather than being behind an average of seven or eight months. For some children, even between 72-76 months, the opportunity to wait may be sought. I had children born in July-August and we had real problems. class teacher 21

Family is more important than the decision to start school or not. Parental support is more important than anything else in this regard, as in many other matters. One way or another, whatever decision is made, one should be prepared for the consequences. Both situations have their own responsibilities. If you say which one would I choose, it seems less responsibilities of not starting. class teacher 30

On the other hand, negative codes are higher in parents' opinions. Although the parents who started their children in school in the 69-71 month period have positive views on the process, it cannot be said that they are one hundred percent positive. For these children, who have options for starting school, the decision to start, given by the parents, also carries question marks. In the same way, the parents who did not start it, "I wonder if it would have started?" The question is always hidden somewhere.

The views of one of the primary school parents can be given as an example here.

He had no problems with his lessons. He learned to read with his friends. Our teacher also says that he is very successful. But I can't help but think "what if" at the slightest glitch. Primary School Parent 7

Students who attend kindergarten because they are not 72 months old

"What are the opinions of teachers and parents about students who continue to kindergarten because they have not completed 72 months?" Interviews were held with each participant regarding the problem. The responses received from all teachers and parents are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Views on students who attend kindergarten

Category	Themes	Positive Opinion		Negative Opinion	
Kindergarten teacher 5 participants	Lessons	3	%100	-	-
	Social	2	%67	1	%33
	Decision	3	%100	-	-
Kindergarten Parent 3 participants	Success	4	%80	1	%20
	Friendship	4	%80	1	%20
	Satisfaction	5	%100	-	-

Students who are 69-71 months old as of September when schools are opened can continue to kindergarten with a petition. Some of the parents prefer to enroll their children in kindergarten for one more year by following this rule. Interviews were held with these parents and the kindergarten teachers of these children. As can be seen from Table 2, kindergarten teachers do not support starting primary school before completing 72 months. Kindergarten teachers were 100% unanimous in their decision to continue one more year of kindergarten. Similarly, kindergarten parents are happy to send their children to kindergarten for another year. Below are some opinions on this.

Of course, there are children who come to our class with a petition. Age differences happen every year anyway. I see the positive development of these children in every aspect. They have advantages such as being able to manage themselves, fully realizing many learnings and leading the class. So a kid who's going to have average or poor performance in first grade is at the forefront here. Kindergarten Teacher 2

Conclusion and Discussion

This study, which was carried out to determine the views of teachers and parents on the age of starting school, was handled from two perspectives as primary school and kindergarten. Primary school participants are mostly recommended for children 69-71 months old to attend kindergarten for one more year. Kindergarten participants fully support one more year of kindergarten attendance.

The findings obtained as a result of the research coincide with the other research findings in the literature. In a study (Gündüz & Özarslan, 2017), the negativities faced by children who started school before completing 72 months were highlighted and the decision not to start was supported. On the other hand, in the related study, it was stated that children who completed 72 months faced fewer problems.

It is stated that teachers have problems in the teaching process with students who start school before they turn 72 months. The age difference in the classroom has resulted in the need for alternative methods and material designs. In addition, students have difficulties in class rules, perceiving instructions, and adapting to the course duration (Yılmaz et al., 2014). In the study conducted by Tural & Behçet (2015), it was reported that the school starting age has an effect on academic skills such as literacy. In the related study, the academic performance of the students who completed 72 months is higher than the students who started early.

In the study conducted by Güler & Onur (2016), it was stated that the age of starting school has an effect on school adjustment. Accordingly, the higher the school starting age, the

higher the school adjustment scores. In another study conducted in Norway by Black et al. (2011) it was stated that starting school later has positive results in many contexts. In the study conducted by Şahin et al. (2022), it was investigated whether the age of starting primary school has an effect on the scores obtained in the exams years later. When the eighth grade students' high school entrance exam scores were grouped according to the school starting age, it was seen that the scores of the students in the group who started school at an early age were lower. So starting primary school isn't just about first grade. The school starting age is important because it affects many aspects of life in the following years.

Suggestions

According to the views of parents, the role of parents is clearly important in the process of starting school. Since the indecision in the minds of the parents will reflect on the child, the decision of the parents and the situation in their minds must first be clear. It is clear that once a decision has been made, the best thing to do is to take steps to support that decision. Parents who decide to start primary school or continue kindergarten should not leave their children alone in the process. The confusion in the minds of the parents is reflected in their behavior and therefore in the students.

According to teachers' opinions, the school starting age is important. If there is indecision, in other words, if the parent's mind is not clear, it may be preferable to start one year later. The opinions of the teachers in this study are in the direction of not starting early.

Although the scope of this study is three months (October-November-December), where flexibility is left in the decision to start school, the decision to start school is important beyond three months. Starting primary school means starting secondary school in a way. Because a student who is included in the system continues to secondary school, high school or even university without a break, unless there are extra situations. Therefore, the school starting age should be handled by experts considering much more than just primary school first grade qualifications and the right decision should be made.

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