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## School Entry Age: 66 Months of Age for Literacy Skills

Nehir Sert\*

*Baskent Universitesi Egitim Fakultesi Baglica Kampusu, EskisehirYolu, 20. Km., Ankara 06530-Türkiye*

### Abstract

The new Compulsory Education Law enacted in 2012 lowered school entry age from 72 months to 66 in Turkey. The interaction among age, schooling, and early literacy has been issue of interest. The aim of this study was to examine literacy development of first graders in terms of school entry age and pre-schooling. This qualitative case study was conducted at three primary schools in Ankara. One of them was a private primary school in which children of high income families attended. The other two were state primary schools; in one of which children of middle -income families, and in the other, children of low-income families attended. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The participants of the study were nine first grade teachers to give implications from classroom settings via their experiences. The curriculum guide and annual/daily lesson plans of grade 1 Turkish course were also analyzed. The findings indicated that the children below 72 months had shorter attention span and their literacy development took longer time. Effective literacy training at pre-school stage had positive influence on the literacy.

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### Introduction

The international variation in school entry age (SEA) is within the four (48 months) - to seven (84 months)-year-old range. The appropriate time for SEA is a complex issue due to numerous influential factors, and the literature presents inconclusive results. For example, Wils (2004) examined children in Mozambic and other 26 developing countries and found a negative correlation between late entry and survival ratios. She speculated that there might be reasons other than age explaining this relationship. Firstly, parents who send their children to school as early as permitted might be more motivated about education. Secondly, older children might be more likely than younger children to have responsibilities within the household or at work leading to drop-out (cited in Nonoyama-Tarumi,

\* Corresponding Author: Nehir Sert. Tel.: +90-312-246-6666  
E-mail address: [nsert@baskent.edu.tr](mailto:nsert@baskent.edu.tr)

Loaiza & Engle 2010, p. 106). On the other hand, Bedard and Dhuey (2006) found that one year late enrolment caused decrease in grade retention, and increase in test scores until the eighth grade in the United States and Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Although the literature gives little evidence whether earlier or later SEA gives better educational results, it is clear that important learning characteristics such as self-esteem, motivation and confidence are established before the age of 6 (e.g. Schagan & Sainsbury, 1996; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Marcon, 2002; cited in Cassidy, 2005, p. 144). Furthermore, children’s literacy skills such as phonological, phonemic and morphological awareness should be developed from an early age (NCCA, 2012). Digital literacy, which is the key concept of the New Millennium, might be another challenge, and require us to revise the perspectives of early literacy development. A study conducted in the USA indicated that children under the age of 6 are immersed in technology use from birth (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). However, the literature discussed below gives no clues about the relationship between literacy development and SEA.

Children in New Zealand begin to take intensive reading instruction at age five, which results in quite high reading achievement. However, this requires further consideration since this success is true for the top readers, and there is a large gap between the top and the bottom readers (Suggate, 2009). Reports from parents in South Africa indicate that learners who started school at ages 6 and 7 achieved higher reading performance outcomes than learners who started school either younger or older (PIRLS, 2006). A positive age effect was found on Reading, Mathematics and Science performance of the children in Hungary where compulsory primary education starts at six (Hámori, 2007). Elley (1992) analysed data across 32 countries from the 1990–1991 the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement study. Elley (1992) then compared the mean reading performance of nine-year-old children in the top 10 and bottom 10 performing countries. When economic and social factors were controlled, the countries with the highest adjusted reading performance at age nine began school nearly six months earlier on average, suggesting a slight advantage for earlier beginners. However, these findings require replication (cited in Suggate, 2009, p. 154). The re-analysis of the data from the reading portion of the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study suggested no significant association between reading achievement and SEA (Suggate, 2009).

The new Compulsory Education Law enacted in 2012 lowered SEA from 72 months to 66 in Turkey. Firstly, the education reform bill proposed to drop the beginning of education to 60 plus age. However, it generated heated debates, and then the bill passed by the parliament after raising SAE to 66 months. Although debates increasingly continue, most of them rely on the ideas that do not have sufficient scientific basis. Due to the fact that learning to read and entering school are among the most critical experiences in life span, the aim of this study was to examine literacy development of first graders with specific reference to school entry age and pre-schooling.

**1. Method**

This qualitative case study was conducted at three primary schools. One of them was a private primary school in which children of high income families attended. The other two were state primary schools; in one of which children of middle -income families, and in the other, children of low-income families attended (Table 1).

Table 1 The participants and the sites

Sites	Profile	Participants	Pre schooling		Age	
			Yes	No	Below 72 months	72+months
A state school- Ankara	low-income families	3 First grade teachers	5	89	46	24
A state school- Ankara	midle income families	3 First grade teachers	60	-	32	28
A private school- Ankara	high income families	3 First grade teachers	45	-	15	30

The data were collected by examining the documents and interviewing the participants. The documents examined were the curriculum guide and annual/daily lesson plans of grade 1 Turkish course. Three first grade teachers from each school were interviewed to give implications from classroom settings via their experiences. The semi-structured interview form below was used:

- What sort of problems do the learners below 72 months have regarding literacy training? Why?
- How does pre-schooling affect literacy development of the learners below 72 months? Why?

The data collected through documents and interviews were content analysed.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1. *The curriculum guide and annual/unit plans*

The previous curriculum designed for 72 month old children in 2009 was still being used for the children below 72 months. The only difference made in the curriculum for the younger ones was the preparatory and adaptation activities for seven weeks preceding the other activities that already existed in the curriculum. Those activities were made up of songs, games and so forth.

**Phonemic awareness instruction:** The aim of the program was to help children feel, recognize, identify, manipulate, blend and segment the phonemes. To this end; materials such as rhymes, songs, stories and visuals were used.

**Reading and writing instruction:** The students were supposed to learn to; associate the sounds with letters (phonic skills), read and write sounds/letters, generate syllables from sounds/letters, read and write syllables, generate words from syllables, read and write words, associate words with visuals, read and write sentences, generate texts. These learning outcomes were achieved through activities such as word/sentence scramble games, matching letters/syllables/words/sentences with visuals. Drama and role-play activities were also used.

The student progress was evaluated through rubrics.

### 2.2. *Interviews*

**School entry age:** All the instructors stated that learners below 72 months had two main problems different from 72 month old and older children had: 1) their attention span was shorter, 2) they could learn more slowly. However, they also claimed that one of the main reasons for those problems was the curriculum which was not specifically designed for their age. The other reason was about some high-income parents who did not have the time to support the school. It was also clear from the statements of the instructors that most of the parents from any income group were rather protective that their children could not develop self-care skills that affected the development of some psycho-motor skills necessary for writing. The extracts reproduced below explain these views:

**Extract 1** “Their focusing span is shorter. We need more time to achieve our goals with younger learners. Our main problem is to complete the syllabus in time. The program is suitable for 72 month old children. We try to make the younger ones to catch up with them. However they get frustrated. For example, one of them says ‘I worked hard. I have done a lot of homework. I’m tired. Don’t you understand? I won’t do it anymore. I will complain to my mom’”

**Extract 2** “The curriculum aims to prepare children for school for seven weeks through games and hands on activities. However, they say those are piece of cake activities, and they are disinclined to do them. Actually, the media prepares them for school. My three year old niece reads. Writing comes after reading. All of them read. They have difficulties in writing. The texts are too long for them. The curriculum is not compatible with the child level. The previous program which was designed for older learners is implemented to younger ones. That’s the problem. We started our education with a text entitled ‘Skeptical ‘Rooster’. It was so long that I myself got bored.”

**Extract 3** “... However, the mother has to work until ten or eleven p.m. The father is in trade business meaning that he has to work very hard too. They do not have time to take care of their child. Age is not the only factor. If the family supports the school, the child performs like 72 months old children.”

**Pre-schooling:** All the instructors stated that the children who did not have pre-school education could hardly recognize and identify the phonemes. Two extracts below explain this view:

**Extract 1** “They had difficulty in discriminating ‘b’ sound from ‘d’.”

**Extract 2** “They cannot recognize the sounds although they are very intelligent and witty. For example, I asked them to say a word which starts with ‘e’ sound [as in send]. One of them said ‘ayna’ [means ‘mirror’ in Turkish] which starts with ‘a’ sound [as in art]. I asked him where is ‘e’ in ‘ayna’. He said it must be squashed between the others.”

On the other hand the ones who had appropriate literacy training at pre-school level were much better at phonemic awareness, and they proceed to read and write more easily. The extract from an instructor below highlights this view:

“They come to school prepared. They know how to hold a pencil. They are more percipient. For example, they feel the sounds easily. I can tell you, they can read and write very quickly if things are done appropriately at preschool level.”

### 3. Conclusion

The curriculum designed for 72 months old and older children in 2009 was used for the children below 72 months. The only difference was the preparatory and adaptation activities added into the curriculum to prepare them for school. Considering the age, the main conclusions taken from the findings were that children below 72 months had shorter attention span, and their literacy development took longer time. The participants stated that many difficulties the younger children had were originated from the curriculum which was not designed specifically for them. Firstly, the duration of the activities was too long, and secondly, the texts were too long and boring for them. The second problem was the families who could not give the appropriate support for the literacy development of the children. The other conclusion to be drawn from the study was that effective literacy training at pre-school stage had positive influence on the literacy development of the first graders in all aspects. When limitations of the study were kept in mind, suggestions for further studies could be as follows:

One could interpret the conclusion above that children below 72 months could acquire the literacy skills as older children could when their specific needs were met. It is worthwhile, then, examining the success of children below 72 months in literacy development when appropriate curriculum, true parental involvement, and effective pre-school training provided.

SEA is still a controversial issue and needs substantiation in the digital age where children are born into technology. The dilemma whether to lower SEA or not in the Turkish context can be reviewed from this challenging point of view. Findings of more comprehensive studies including both quantitative and qualitative methodologies can give important implications for a timely start for literacy development in the Millennium in which technologically literate individuals will have the control.

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