

Fathers' Perceptions of and their Role in the School Readiness of their Preschool Child

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Abstract

The study explored fathers' perceptions of and their role in preparing their preschool child for mainstream education. The role of fathers in providing conditions for optimal development of children is often overlooked. This exploratory study incorporated semi-structured interviews with nine fathers residing in Cape Town, South Africa. Audio recordings were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Three thematic categories were identified: perceptions of school readiness, external feedback that guides fathers' perspectives of school readiness; and roles and responsibilities regarding school readiness. The findings suggested that, in general, fathers lacked knowledge about school readiness and child development. Fathers' beliefs about school readiness were often informed by their subjective experiences. The feedback from professionals was acknowledged as a primary source of information about school readiness. External facilitation of school readiness happens across numerous contexts pertaining to the individual, family, and school. Fathers were regarded as important role players across these contexts. It emerged that fathers' roles remain undervalued and their ability to participate is diminished owing to their limited knowledge, gendered patterns to child rearing, and the lack of engagement with school systems.

Keywords: early childhood development, school readiness, fatherhood, Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition



Introduction and Background

School readiness is an important aspect of early childhood development (ECD). The responsibility for child development and preparation for school primarily rests on parents or caregivers (Meuwissen and Carlson 2018). The rapidly growing literature on parents' involvement in ECD and specifically school readiness, reflects the global focus on ECD (Kernan 2012). Research related to ECD over the last five decades included many research studies involving fathers. Munnik and Smith (2019) and Lewis (2014) lodged two criticisms against this growing body of literature. First, there was no distinction between the terms, parent and mother. The synonymous use of these two terms obscures the important findings related to the role of fathers in ECD. Second, systematic enquiry into the involvement of fathers in the preparation of their child for entry into mainstream schooling remains an area for further investigation.

Literature Review

The global focus on ECD includes the preparation of children for entry into mainstream education (Mncanca, Okeke, and Fletcher 2016; Van der Berg et al. 2013). The body of literature that specifically reports on the involvement of fathers in ECD and school readiness identified that fathers have a unique and influential role to play in the development of their children. Fathers' involvement contributes to their children's lives in a way that other adults do not (Paquette 2004; Thomas 2008).

Fathers' involvement in ECD has been linked to better social-emotional well-being and peer relationships, less behaviour problems, reduced criminality and substance abuse, better education, empathy, better adult sexual relationships, increased self-esteem, and increased life satisfaction (Allen and Daly 2007; Cabrera, Shannon, and Tamis-LeMonda 2007; Jeynes 2015). One of the few longitudinal studies found that father-child interactions, even from a very young age (i.e. three months), may influence children's cognitive development (Sethna et al. 2017). The literature points to the significant ways in which fathers contribute to the development of a child's social skills through their warmth and sensitivity, sense of humour, and school- and home-based educational involvement (Allen and Daly 2007). Children's self-regulatory skills, shown to be enhanced by rough-and-tumble play with their fathers, have been strongly associated with their social functioning (Hagman 2014; Paquette 2004).

Morgan et al. (2014) reported that fathers have a unique and important role in shaping their children's dietary and physical activity behaviours. Through play, men's sense of humour, their tendency to excite and surprise children, and their encouragement to take risks while also providing safety and security, teach children to be braver and more confident in unfamiliar situations. The unique way that fathers play with their children contributes to developing an openness to the world (Paquette 2004).

Fathers were found to favourably influence a child's attitude towards learning that in turn play a critical role in predicting student achievement motivation and engagement (Mansour and Martin 2009). Fathers contribute to their children's language development in a unique way through their questions, level of education and use of vocabulary (Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans 2010). Fathers ask more "who, why, where, what" questions that stimulate discussion and engagement (Leech et al. 2013).

The findings reported above reflect studies that focused on fathers' contribution to ECD. These studies focused on the association of paternal involvement with particular outcomes. What becomes evident is that these studies do not explore intentionality or understandings of fathers' relative role in achieving these outcomes. The focus appears to be on gendered roles and engagement with children that are associated with the stated outcomes (Thomas 2008). Thus, there is a need to study the role of fathers in a more focused manner that includes perceptions, ideas, beliefs and actions to achieve school readiness as an outcome (Hebrard 2017). This manuscript reports on a study that explored fathers' understanding of their ideas about their role in preparing their child for school, and any perceived barriers and facilitators that affect their involvement and facilitation of school readiness.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen for this study was the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). This framework guides empirical research on the transition to formal schooling. It expanded the measures of school readiness from the child's competence to include contextual and systems factors. This model proposes that the interconnectedness and interdependence of the relationships between the child and the numerous systems that influence the child's development contribute to the school readiness. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) summarised the theoretical model in four key points. First, it recognises the influence of numerous contexts on the child's capabilities. Second, it investigates the links among the contexts that have an impact on children's transition to school, such as home, school, peers, and neighbourhood. Third, it examines the relationships among contexts and social systems and the way in which changes over time influence school readiness. Fourth, it examines risks associated with the transition to formal schooling and integration into the new school context. In the present study, fathers' perspectives of school readiness were identified as part of the dynamic interaction between the home, school and the neighbourhood that influence a child's school readiness.

Research Methods and Design

Research Design

An exploratory research design was selected for this study. The perceptions of fathers of school readiness have been under-researched and warranted an exploratory approach.

Research Setting

The participants were recruited from suburbs surrounding Cape Town, South Africa. This geographical area offers a unique combination of demographics including lower and higher income and education groups and a mix of race groups that makes for a diverse target group.

Participants and Sampling

Inclusion criteria and target group

The participants were selected from the target group of fathers who satisfied two requirements:

- Fathers must have acquired full legal parental rights and responsibilities in accordance with Section 21 of the Children's Amendment Act (South Africa 2007).
- Eligible participants must have a child who is in Grade R, i.e. a child who is of compulsory school starting age (the year in which the child turns seven years).

These two criteria were not assumed to imply involvement in or familiarity with the child's process of becoming school ready. Instead, it was assumed to mean that the father was in a legal position to be attending to the child's needs in good faith as specified in Section 21 of the Children's Act (South Africa 2007).

Sampling Strategy

Snowball sampling was used to recruit the participants. The initial response to recruitment adverts at identified schools yielded three participants. These participants in turn identified a further six possible contacts of which four agreed to be interviewed. A further two fathers were identified by the participants in the second round of interviewing. The final sample consisted of nine South African fathers. The sample size was deemed appropriate based on two considerations: (1) sample size guidelines for qualitative studies; and (2) data saturation. The sample size fell within the range of 6 to 12 participants recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2011). Data collection was ceased once the content of interviews became repetitive in accordance with the recommendation of Baker and Edwards (2012). After nine interviews, there was repetition in the content of the interviews and the themes emerging from the analysis.

The demographic profile of the final sample was as follows: Ages ranged between 27 and 46 years. All except two fathers had reached a tertiary level of education. One father did not matriculate and left school after completing Grade 11. All fathers were permanently employed. All fathers except one, were married. One father was divorced and had sole custody of his child. The spouses of three of the participants were German-speaking. Seven participants were from a higher socio-economic status (SES) level and two from a lower SES level.

Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted along an interview schedule or guide. The fathers were prompted by questions such as: “Are you familiar with the term school readiness?” and “What do you understand by the term school readiness?” Lastly, the researcher attempted to evaluate the initial interview schedule by conducting a pilot interview. This was transcribed by the researcher which aided the process of reflecting on the questions. Minor adjustments were made to facilitate a more conversational rather than an academic format of questioning. The resultant interview schedule was also translated into Afrikaans to accommodate the participants who preferred Afrikaans. In addition, voice memos were made directly after each interview to aid reflection on the interview content and process. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In keeping with Biggerstaff (2012), data collection and analysis happened in parallel.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis (TA). This study followed a combination of Aronson’s (1995) pragmatic description of the TA process and the recursive process of Clarke and Braun (2013). The TA steps were applied with rigour by constructing the themes through an iterative process that included consultation with supervisors to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data analysis. Reflexivity, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity, as described by Elo et al. (2014), were used as strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness of the data.

Ethics Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape (HS/16/5/41). Fathers’ identities were anonymised through codes and confidentiality was ensured. Fathers who showed an interest in the present study were first contacted telephonically, then supplied with an information sheet via email. It was explained that participation was voluntary, and participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits. None of the participants withdrew from the study. The participants were asked to complete a consent form before being interviewed, which included permission to make audio recordings.

Findings

Three thematic categories were identified from the thematic analyses of the data, namely, (1) perceptions of school readiness, (2) external feedback that guides fathers’ perspectives of school readiness, and (3) roles and responsibilities. Each category included themes. Table 1 presents the themes that fathers identified.

Table 1: Categories and themes

Categories	Themes
Perceptions of school readiness	Understanding of school readiness Components of school readiness Context influences understanding School readiness and age Breadth of knowledge and impact on decision-making
External feedback that guides fathers' perspectives	Who gives feedback? In which way is the feedback actioned?
Roles and responsibilities	Who is responsible? Roles

Category One: Perspectives of School Readiness

This category included fathers' perceptions of school readiness. Five themes emerged and are discussed below.

Theme 1: Understanding of school readiness

None of the fathers was confident in their knowledge about school readiness. They reported that their understanding of school readiness ranged from not knowing what school readiness meant to having some familiarity with the term.

If I must think about it, then I don't know exactly, I'm not a hundred per cent sure what I should consider, I don't have a list to tell me exactly where my child should be . . . So school readiness, I know the term, I think it should be that children should be ready to go into this phase. What exactly 'ready' is, that I don't know. (F1, 42 years, entrepreneur)

This verbatim account summarised most of the responses. The fathers seemed to implicitly understand school readiness rather than explicitly. The participants expressed an understanding of readiness to enrol for Grade 1, but did not necessarily have an explicit theoretical explanation for school readiness in itself. The fathers based their understanding of school readiness primarily on the information available to them, their subjective experience and societal discourse. There was no clear consensus in fathers' relative understanding of school readiness.

Theme 2: Components of school readiness

The participants identified aspects of school readiness that were organised into seven discernible components. Cognition and general knowledge emerged as the most important components. Language and literacy were identified as important factors next to cognition and knowledge. All the participants identified physical development as an indicator of readiness. The participants identified behavioural factors that consist of

attitudes to learning as an indicator of readiness. The majority of the fathers in the study demonstrated an awareness that social and emotional abilities have an impact on the child's school readiness. The following verbatim quote illustrates the reported awareness:

I used to think school readiness is about whether you can read and write. I didn't value the fact that you also had to be emotionally ready to go to school. I think that's important in the way I look at it now. (F9, 39 years, entrepreneur)

The participants' awareness of the social and emotional components of school readiness was attributed directly to the feedback from teachers and caregivers on the readiness of their preschool children.

Theme 3: Context influences understanding

The fathers reflected that their personal experiences influenced their understanding of and approach to school readiness. Their history and life experiences reportedly informed their parenting styles and beliefs. This in turn influenced the way in which they approached their child's readiness to enter school. Similarly, the nature and extent of their involvement with the school were influenced by personal experiences.

I did a degree in Human Movement Science at Tuks and a postgrad at the Business School GSB . . . I have a business that coaches foundation phase sport . . . OK, perhaps I should start with the physical because that's more certain ground for me. (F1, 42 years, entrepreneur)

This verbatim response illustrates the way in which a father, with a background and career in sport, constructed his ideas about school readiness around the physical aspects of child development. Thus, fathers' personal contexts influence the way in which they engage with or approach the development of their children.

Theme 4: School readiness and age

Fathers unanimously identified chronological age as an indicator of maturity and school readiness. They all acknowledged that children develop at a different pace and that age was not a sufficient indicator of school readiness. The extract below illustrates this sentiment:

As it stands now, I'd say [children are ready] later rather than earlier . . . I don't have the solution, but to my mind it makes sense that a child must be ready, rather than be old enough. (F1, 42 years, entrepreneur)

The participants identified that the physical, cognitive and emotional development of children should be considered alongside age.

Theme 5: Breadth of knowledge and impact on decision-making

This theme related to fathers' lack of knowledge about school readiness and developmental milestones. The fathers reported that they had to make decisions about enrolling their children but lacked information as to what school readiness entailed. This lack of knowledge caused anxiety and concern about their ability to facilitate school readiness in their children.

School readiness, that one was challenging, especially for my daughter, you know you want the best for your kids, right? But the thing is I just didn't know how to tackle it. (F5, 30 years, gym manager).

The feeling of inadequacy was worsened when they received feedback from professionals about the readiness of their preschool child. Some fathers reported that they did not understand the terminology and were not comfortable asking for clarification. This left them feeling out of their depth, because they were limited by their breadth of knowledge in these areas.

Category Two: External Feedback that Guides Fathers' Perspectives of School Readiness

The second thematic category identified external feedback as an important part of the way in which fathers made sense of their children's readiness for school. This category included two themes.

Theme 1: Who provides feedback?

The fathers reported that their awareness of school readiness was largely informed by feedback from external people or systems. In most cases, Grade R teachers, as the representatives of the education system, provided such feedback. In more challenging cases, healthcare professionals may provide additional feedback after special investigations such as testing. The fathers related the way in which teachers and professionals (for example, counsellors, psychologists, occupational therapists and paediatricians) contributed by identifying potential barriers to a child's school readiness and by providing interventions to aid school readiness. Communication, interaction and collaboration between teachers and parents are thus vital for the child's successful transition to Grade 1. The quote below illustrates the way in which one father became aware of a potential barrier to his child's readiness for school and learning.

From the beginning of the year the school called us in, and they're familiar with the problem and had seen it before, so they could identify it and sort of said we should send him to a psychologist for assessment. (F2, 49 years, IT consultant)

Thus, feedback from credible and experienced external sources was the catalyst that moved most fathers to become aware of potential barriers to readiness and learning. By

the same token, the feedback triggered increased involvement in the child's process of becoming ready for school.

Theme 2: In which way is the feedback actioned?

The fathers did not always know how to interpret feedback from teachers or how to move beyond the feedback stage to initiate intervention when teachers suggested it. Coordination and collaboration seemed to be lacking, as they were often referred from one professional to another. Preparing a child for school was therefore a consultative but often uncoordinated process. The fathers reported that their families had to seek referrals and were responsible for implementing interventions that are more easily facilitated by a multidisciplinary team.

In my case it's a little different because we've been through therapy and school-readiness sessions with a therapist, apart from C [the school counsellor], he's also been evaluated by a clinical psychologist because they suspected he has a sensory sensitivity . . . How an occupational therapist will approach it, he'll probably have to go for sessions for the next two-to-three months. I haven't identified one [occupational therapist] yet. (F2, 49 years, IT consultant)

From the above quote it becomes clear that the responsibility to find an occupational therapist fell on the parents. Thus, following up on referrals is delayed when it does not take place in a multidisciplinary team or does not already include names of potential service providers. What emerged from the fathers' experiences was that the lack of coordination in support services was not experienced as entirely supportive or holistic. The findings suggest that fathers (and parents) experienced challenges when accessing services. Those who manage to access services may not use them optimally as they lack the knowledge base to engage and make sense of the feedback they received.

Category Three: Roles and Responsibilities Pertaining to School Readiness

The third thematic category identified that roles and responsibilities in relation to the facilitation of school readiness were assumed along gendered patterns. Two themes emerged: who is deemed responsible and who assumes primary responsibility.

Theme 1: Who is responsible?

Most fathers felt that it is primarily the parents' responsibility to facilitate their child's readiness for school. The quote below illustrates the sentiment.

Parents. First and foremost, I believe parents. And to a lesser degree teachers. (F4, 44 years, entrepreneur)

This belief seemed to cause cognitive dissonance for two main reasons. First, the fathers did not know exactly what was required for their child to be school ready. Yet they believed that parents were responsible. Second, most fathers were actively involved

with their children in many other ways, but still assumed an indirect role in their children's education.

Theme 2: Roles

Most participants readily gave the mothers of their children the credit for taking the lead with their children's education.

My wife is amazing in terms of where he is with his development. She's actually the driving force, I'm not going to give myself credit for that . . . If it weren't for her, if it weren't for the school, for me it would have just been a process, he just goes to school. (F3, 38 years, property renovator)

Mothers thus stepped into the gender-stereotypical role as main liaison between home and school. In instances in which both fathers and mothers work full-time, roles were defined less traditionally. Overall, traditional gender roles were upheld in the present study. The fathers reportedly primarily engaged in the role of breadwinners, playmates and disciplinarians.

Discussion

Fathers' understanding of school readiness: The fathers reported a lack of clarity on what school readiness entails and the understandings reported varied. The variation noted in fathers' understanding is also mirrored in the literature where there is no uniform definition of school readiness (Mohamed 2013; Moore 2008). Similarly, Munnik and Smith (2019) reported that differences in the definition of school readiness remain despite researchers highlighting the need for congruent ideas and practices of school readiness. The lack of clarity on what school readiness entails and the variation reported have implications for the way in which preparation for school readiness is facilitated by all stakeholders, from researchers and academics to educators to parents or fathers (Texas Early Learning Council 2011).

The fathers' understanding of and approach to school readiness, and their involvement with the school were influenced by their personal history and experience. Considering the fathers' personal context is therefore important when engaging with them about their involvement at school or about the development of their child. This finding resonated with research that has shown that a father's own developmental history in part influences his involvement in his children's care and development (Coley and Hernandez 2006).

Components of school readiness: The fathers identified numerous aspects that indicate school readiness. The results may reflect current societal discourse and focus on these skills. The fathers' understanding of school readiness was mainly centred on their children's skills. This understanding is based on the maturational view, focused on the skills or abilities of the child. It is a widely used but limited method of evaluating a

child's school readiness. There was evidence of the involvement of different systems, but less attention to the interrelationships and relative responsibility for facilitating school readiness. This is a further manifestation of the maturational view that school readiness is a function of age. The findings indicated an awareness among the fathers that this default position was not enough. The findings of the present study resonate with the global view that age is not sufficient. McTurk et al. (2011) reported that age was not a reliable indicator of school readiness, even though it has been the deciding factor of a child's readiness for school entry for many years (Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos 2017). The responsibility of readying children for school must be located in numerous systems, such as school and the community (Munnik and Smith 2019; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000).

Fathers' perceptions of their role or the relative contribution they make in facilitating a child's school readiness: The fathers acknowledged their ultimate responsibility for their children's school readiness. Some fathers in the study engaged in early literacy activities, but most fathers' intentional involvement was not commensurate with the acknowledgement that they have a responsibility, primary or secondary, to facilitate school readiness. They acknowledged that in practice, the mother often steps into the role of liaison between school and home. Although some fathers were not actively involved in school, or in communication with teachers, they showed keen engagement with their children in other ways. The fathers seemed to undervalue their role as playmates and its contribution to the development of skills that facilitate their children's school readiness.

Britto and Limlingan (2012) identified that parents' mindset about their roles and responsibilities in readying their children was a good indicator of children's readiness for school. The findings of the present study resonated with those of Belfield and Garcia (2014) who asserted that there was no strong consistency between parents' beliefs and their efforts with their children at home as it relates to school readiness. Similarly, Puccioni (2015) reported that parents' school readiness beliefs influenced their use of transition practices, which in turn positively predicted their children's academic achievements. Moore (2008) suggested that further research could focus on the types of activity and frequency of activities as they relate to parents' perceptions and beliefs of school readiness.

The study identified barriers to and facilitators of the fathers' involvement in the facilitation of school readiness. The most frequently reported barrier was the fathers' limited availability owing to their work constraints. When considering the fathers' limited understanding of what school readiness entails, it is to be expected that they relied on mothers, teachers and various professionals to guide their children's school readiness. Thomas (2008) pointed to the need for schools to reach out more to fathers and encourage participation in parent-school interactions and the benefits of this partnership.

The fathers reported that they became aware of challenges in response to the feedback from teachers. Thus, the feedback was the catalyst that moved most fathers to become involved in their child's process of becoming ready for school. The fathers reported that their families had to seek referrals and were responsible for actioning interventions that are more easily facilitated by a multidisciplinary team. What emerged from the fathers' contributions was that the approach to school readiness was not entirely supportive or holistic. The fathers' ability to make effective decisions about readying their children for school is curtailed or limited by the extent to which they understand what readiness entails, comprehend, and action feedback from the school or professionals. They could benefit from stronger relationships and collaboration between the systems to facilitate a successful transition to Grade 1.

The findings from the present study resonated with those by McIntyre et al. (2007) who reported that the majority of families wanted more involvement and more information about readiness, including academic and behavioural expectations. Similarly, the findings of the present study concurred with those by Hatcher, Nuner, and Paulsel (2012) who found that most parents had a general feeling of anxiety about their children's readiness for kindergarten including academic preparation, social skills, and the ability to adapt to school routines or programmes. Munnik (2018) and Brown (2016) identified collaboration and communication between school and home as important factors in children's successful transition to formal school. Similarly, Bierman, Morris, and Abenavoli (2017) recommended that communication between families and schools or systems be improved to facilitate optimal success in education.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this article was to report on the findings of the exploratory investigation on fathers' perspectives of school readiness. The findings suggested that fathers have inadequate knowledge about school readiness and child development. Personal context and subjective experiences informed their views and beliefs about school readiness. Fathers focused on children's abilities as primary indicators of readiness that reflected the traditional maturational view of school readiness. Feedback from teachers and professionals was valued as the primary source of information about their children's school readiness including challenges or problems in this realm. Fathers viewed parents as primarily being responsible for readying preschool children for school. Despite this view, fathers were less directly involved in the preparation of their children for school. Likewise, fathers lacked the knowledge about school readiness that would enable them to intervene accordingly. The relationship between fathers and teachers, and the lack of communication between the systems emerged as potential risks to a child's successful transition to school.

Limitations of the Study

The researchers concluded that a sense of saturation was reached when the content of the interviews started repeating. This is possibly owing to the homogenous nature of the sample. If a more diversified sample were selected, it may have resulted in a wider range of subjective perceptions and experiences. The recruitment process was also a limitation as it relied on the participants identifying other eligible fathers. The recommendations were, as expected, from within their networks that potentially contributed to the homogeneity of the sample and content of the views shared. The study was limited by the inclusion criterion that fathers had to have acquired rights and responsibilities in accordance with the Children's Amendment Act. This excluded men who were in a fathering role but did not satisfy the stated criterion. The acquisition of parental rights and responsibilities as a legal requirement does not equate to active engagement in the fathering role. The theoretical framework offered a nuanced conceptualisation to guide research about the transition to school. The framework was applied in a limited manner to inform the formulation of the objectives, which in turn informed the line of questioning in the semi-structured interviews.

Recommendations for Further Study

Systematic enquiry into the perceptions and role of fathers in the preparation of their children for school remains a focus of further research. Future studies should have more inclusive sampling frames to allow for men who assume a fathering role regardless of their legal parental status. South African legislature continues to be biased towards men in marital relationships in terms of the acquisition of parental rights and responsibilities. Future studies should attempt to apply the theoretical framework to explore the perceived links between components and systems. The nature and quality of communication between parents, teachers and healthcare professionals should be explored to reduce the potential risks posed.

Practice Implications

The findings of the study raises three key considerations for healthcare professionals in their service delivery in the area of ECD and school readiness assessments. First, the findings, albeit exploratory, underscore the importance of recognising the role that fathers could play in the readying of a child for school. Practitioners should be mindful that parental rights and responsibilities are not automatically acquired, and therefore awareness training and advocacy are important. Second, the findings indicate that fathers (and mothers) lacked knowledge about school readiness. Parenting skills training should attempt to incorporate focused information about childhood development and school readiness. It should also attempt to expand parents' knowledge to include an understanding of the way in which activities and engagements (for example, play) contribute to development and readiness. Third, the assessments and interventions for

school readiness should include the context and experiences of fathers (and mothers) to develop an understanding of the way in which those contexts influence parenting styles and approaches to school readiness preparation.

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