

Parents' Perceptions of School Readiness in Grade One in Oman

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Abstract

Research suggests that there is an existing disparity among children starting compulsory education, many of whom struggle to meet its demands. This study explores the perceptions of parents of Grade One children in public schools in Oman on school readiness, addressing a context of a diverse early childhood education landscape, where access is predominantly private. A survey design using questionnaires is employed to explore school-readiness conceptualisation, influencing factors, challenges encountered, and the impact of early childhood education (ECE). The findings suggest that school readiness is a complex and multifaceted concept shaped by the interplay of various stakeholders in the research context. They emphasise the significance not only of ready children but also of ready parents, teachers and schools in shaping readiness. Additionally, the research stresses the importance of children starting compulsory education equipped with academic proficiency and familiarity with the schooling system. This indicates a pedagogical shift towards an academic-centric stance and the educationalisation of ECE in Oman, reflecting global trends. However, despite these expectations, this research suggests that children continue to face readiness challenges, including gaps in academic knowledge, school adjustment issues, and limited social skills. ECE emerges as a crucial factor in supporting school readiness, shaping academic knowledge, facilitating smooth transitions, and nurturing social-emotional well-being, despite the persistent disparities. Addressing these disparities necessitates ensuring equitable access to high quality ECE and addressing the multifaceted socioeconomic, cultural, and resource-related barriers to readiness.

Keyword: School Readiness, Early Childhood Education, School Transition, Early Years.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a crucial role in preparing children for compulsory education (McCoy *et al.*, 2017; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). Despite the recognised importance of these early experiences, a persistent disparity exists among children starting compulsory education, suggesting that many children start school unready (Britto & Limlingan, 2012). Consequently, there is growing attention on the concept of school readiness in early childhood, particularly within the Global North research (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006; Britto, 2012; Brown, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Graue, 1992; Meisels, 1998; Rouse, Nicholas, & Garner, 2023). The discourses surrounding school readiness have emerged as a response to the existing disparities among children starting compulsory education, projecting school readiness as of great significance. High quality ECE is proposed as a means to achieve school readiness (Britto, 2012; Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Brown, 2010; Dockett, Griebel, & Perry, 2017; Heckman, 2013).

Within the framework of early years discourses, parents play a crucial role in supporting and shaping children's educational trajectories (Britto, 2012; Epstein, 1997; Garvis, Phillipson, Harju-Luukkainen, & Sadownik, 2022). Thus, this research explores parents' perspectives on school readiness within the context of Oman. By doing so, the research aims to contribute to an understanding of the factors influencing school readiness in a context with diverse early childhood educational experiences.

School Readiness Conceptualisation

While primarily referring to children's readiness for formal school, the concept of school readiness has been through a shift in recent research, suggesting a broader involvement of different factors that contribute to readiness (Britto, 2012; Kinkead-Clark, 2021). Defining 'school readiness' is not straightforward, and various interpretations have been proposed (Kagan, 1990; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Moss, 2013).

Meisels (1998) proposes four interpretations of the concept of school readiness: the *maturational/idealist*, *environmental/empiricist*, *social constructivist*, and *interactionist*. The first interpretation suggests that children become ready through an innate developmental process; the primary determiner of readiness is dependent on the child's inner biological capacity and maturation (Brown, 2010; Meisels, 1998). While this perspective views readiness through the lens of children's *inner abilities*, the environmental or empiricist perspective recognises the role of *external factors* in acquiring the skills and knowledge that shape readiness, such as education (Brown, 2010; Meisels, 1998). The third interpretation, the social constructivist perspective, suggests that children acquire meanings through cultural norms and expectations within their communities (Brown, 2010; Meisels, 1998). Finally, the interactionist perspective integrates both the maturational (internal) and environmental (external) perspectives, highlighting the important interactions between innate capacities and environmental factors in facilitating or hindering readiness. This perspective regards school readiness as the result of the interplay between nature and nurture in a bi-directional process (Meisels, 1998).

Dockett and Perry (2002) and Meisels (1998) suggest that when addressing the conceptualisation of school readiness, it is important to recognise that it is a complex issue; various stakeholders, such as parents and schools, are involved, and they all hold different perspectives and expectations. Thus, it is challenging and impractical to assign a single, universal definition for school readiness (Kagan, 1990; Snow, 2006). Attempting to develop a universal definition for school readiness, as Kinkead-Clark (2021) describes, is a universal direction towards decontextualising child development. Decontextualising child development poses a challenge, as it emphasises standardised, universal methods to assess readiness. Balduzzi and Moss (2013) and Kagan (1990) argue that what happens in the early years before children start compulsory education has an essential influence on their school readiness. Children come from various early experiences, and do not have equal access to high-quality ECE nor the necessary means or resources to be considered ready (Evans, 2015).

Additionally, not all children grow the same, and developmentally appropriate practices portray a linear child development that excludes factors such as social, cultural and various socioeconomic issues (Trawick-Smith, 2019). Adhering to developmentally appropriate practices risks using deficit models with children who do not conform to developmental norms (Burman, 2017; Tager, 2017). Hence, it is crucial to avoid imposing a one-size-fits-all definition of school readiness that does not recognise the diverse early

childhood experiences, the inequality in access to resources as well as the cultural and social differences.

Early Childhood Education in Oman

In Oman, early childhood education (ECE) is overseen by the Ministry of Education in Oman (A. K. Tekin, Al-Salmi, & Al-Mamari, 2021), a departure from previously being supervised under various different entities, such as the Ministry of Social Development (A. Tekin & Mamari, 2019). As of 2018/2019, the ECE enrolment rate was 51.8% (UNESCO, 2021). It is important to note that, unlike compulsory education, ECE in Oman are predominantly not funded (A. K. Tekin *et al.*, 2021). ECE in this research context describes any form of formal education received before starting Grade One.

ECE is accessible through various settings, including Quran schools, early education houses, institutions run by the Royal Oman Police and the Royal Armed Forces, and national and international preschools (Ihmeideh & Al-Qaryouti, 2016; National Centre for Statistics and Information NCSI, 2017).

In Oman, discourses on ECE are shifting towards recognising it as a means to support children's growth, as well as support the economy (A. Tekin & Mamari, 2019; A. K. Tekin *et al.*, 2021; UNICEF, 2019), reflecting a human capital perspective. Consequently, given the relatively low percentage of children accessing ECE, the diverse early childhood educational experiences in the region, and the dominance of privatisation of early education, the context of Oman presents a unique opportunity to explore the concept of 'school readiness'.

Study Aims

This study aims to gain an understanding of parents' perspectives on school readiness, as they navigate their children's transition to Grade One. It offers a unique context, characterised by a spectrum of early educational experiences, or lack thereof, as children start compulsory education. The study assumes that school readiness is a concept better understood within its context and by the lived experiences of the participants. Thus, it utilises a survey with a mix of open-ended and closed ended questions, emphasising the qualitative aspect of the data to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methods

This research employed a survey design using questionnaires, drawing findings from qualitative and quantitative data to explore the perceptions of parents of Grade One children in Oman on school readiness. The questionnaire was designed around a number of thematic areas, including:

- The conceptualisation of school readiness

- The supportive factors related to school readiness
- School readiness challenges
- Early childhood education's impact on school readiness

Participants in this study are parents in Oman with children enrolled in Grade One. The survey utilised a purposive, non-probability sampling approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018), aiming for a group with lived experience of children transitioning from early years' experience to compulsory schooling. The surveys have open and closed-ended questions and were distributed via Qualtrics on different platforms, including WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. While surveys ensure anonymity for participants, it is noted that online surveys may have a poorer completion rate compared to in-person paper surveys (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), which is further discussed in the section on limitations.

Consent was embedded in the survey, with participation discontinued if consent was not provided. The survey included both closed-ended questions, capturing participant background information (e.g. mother/father, age group) and yes/no responses related to various themes (e.g. familiarity with school readiness). It also included open-ended questions,

allowing participants to express their perceptions in detail. Open-ended questions were valuable for exploring parents' understanding of school readiness and sharing qualitative insights. They helped explore the subject, provide qualitative data and reduce unintended influence from yes/no questions that provide specific responses.

The data collection process involved several phases. The first phase of the data collection process was preparing the questionnaire questions. The second phase was piloting the questions; five volunteers provided feedback on them. The third phase involved improving the questions and sending them to 12 volunteers for validation and feedback. The fourth phase was contacting the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI, 2021) in Muscat to seek approval for the survey, which was granted. The fifth phase was distributing the surveys. Initial responses totalled 256 responses, with 124 meeting the criteria for continued participation based on purposive sampling. The last closed-ended research question, question 33, received 49 responses, while the last open-ended question received 33 responses.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 presents the demographic data for the participants responding to the survey questions.

Table 1: The demographic data for the survey participants

Parent	
Fathers	28.37%
Mothers	71.63%
Age	
24 or younger	0.92%
25-34	40.55%
35-44	45.16%
45-54	12.44%
55-64	0.92%
Degree	
Primary education	2.3%
Secondary education/high school diploma	21.66%
Undergraduate degree	54.38%
Postgraduate degree	21.66%

Table 1 indicates that the study predominantly involved mothers, including 71.63% of the participants, while fathers making up 28.37%. This gender disparity may reflect higher levels of mothers' engagement in children's education. Additionally, the majority of participants falls in the age group of 35-44 years old, followed by participants aged 25-34, suggesting that younger to middle-aged parents are significantly presented. In terms of education, 54.38% held an undergraduate degree, while 21.66% had either a postgraduate degree or a diploma, reflecting the primary perspectives of relatively well-educated mothers.

The quantitative data analysis included a set of questions predominantly structured as yes/no questions, except for a single multiple-choice question (see appendix 1). The questions investigated the *participants' familiarity with the school readiness concept*, their *perceptions of their child's readiness for compulsory education*, the *significance of parents' readiness for school*, the *significance of schools being ready*, and *early childhood education's impact on school readiness*. Moreover, participants were asked to specify the *type of ECE their children received* via a multiple-choice question format. The following section presents findings obtained from the quantitative data.

Familiarity with the Concept of School Readiness

When participants were asked about their familiarity with the concept of school readiness, out of 97 respondents, 55 individuals (56.7%) affirmed their knowledge, whereas 42 (43.3%) indicated otherwise. The relatively high percentage of participants unfamiliar with the concept imply a notable gap in their knowledge of the specific word used in educational discourses. However, this does not necessary suggest a lack of understanding of the term as participants contributed to defining school readiness.

Perceptions of Readiness

Participants were asked questions related to their conceptualisation of *children's readiness* for school (see appendix 1). Among 93 participants who contributed, 78 individuals (83.87%) said *yes*, while 15 (16.13%) said *no*. Responding to the question on children's facing challenges with school readiness, 38 participants (69.09%) acknowledged facing challenges, while 17 participants (30.91%) reported none. Children's school readiness does not occur in isolation; rather, it is an ongoing process shaped by continuous support and interaction. Thus, while the majority of participants believed their children were ready for school, the majority suggested otherwise as their children encountered challenges when starting Grade One.

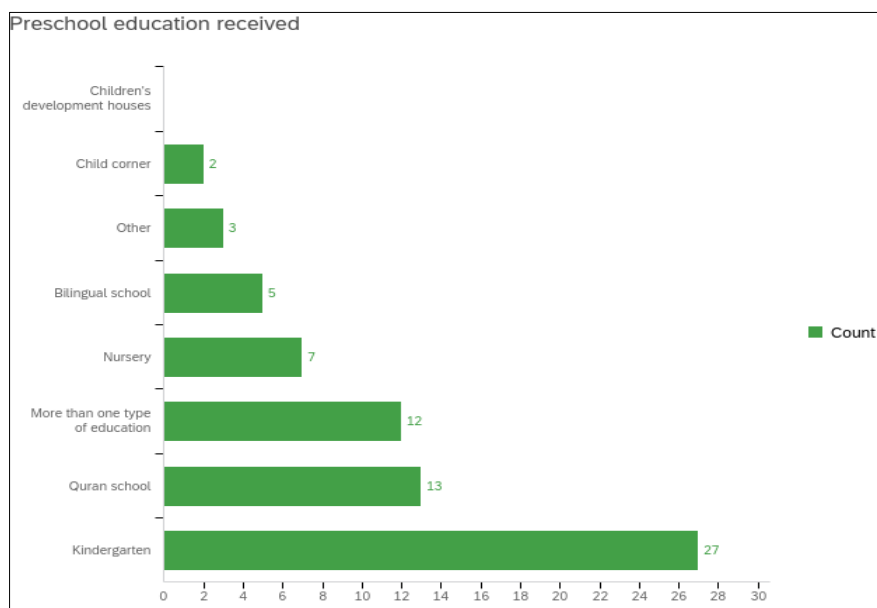
As for the significance of *parents' readiness* for school, participants were asked, out of 76 participants who responded, 69 (90.79%) affirmed that parents need to be ready, while 7 participants (9.21%) disagreed. Another question focused on whether parents supported school readiness. Of the same 76 participants, 74 (97.44%) responded positively, while two (2.56%) responded negatively. These responses suggest that the majority of participants recognise the importance of

parental readiness, both personally as well as in supporting their children. Similarly, Epstein (2013) emphasises the importance of partnership between schools and families to achieve the required educational outcomes.

In response to the question on the significance of *ready schools*, out of 74 participants, 72 (97.3%) affirmed its significance, while two participants (2.7%) did not. Participants were also asked about the support their children received for school readiness. Thirty-three participants (60%) indicated that their children did not receive any support, while 22 participants (40%) acknowledged receiving support. Participants also noted differences in perceptions of school readiness between parents and teachers. Forty-five participants (81.82%) acknowledged the differences, and 10 (18.18%) perceived shared perceptions. Overall, most participants emphasised the importance of schools being ready for their children when starting compulsory education, as well as highlighted differences in perceptions about school readiness between parents and teachers. Furthermore, a majority indicated that their children did not receive support for school readiness when they started school. Similarly to UNICEF report (Britto, 2012), ready schools are crucial in supporting children in their transition to compulsory education.

The Impact of ECE on School Readiness

Participants were asked whether their children received any form of ECE. Fifty-three participants addressed this query, with 49 participants (92.45%) confirming enrolment, while four participants (7.55%) reported its absence. Furthermore, they were presented with a multiple-choice question addressing the type of ECE their child received. The responses are outlined in the following Graph 1.



Graph 1: ECE received by children prior to Grade One

The responses suggest that the predominant enrolment for children was in kindergarten education, followed by Quran schools. Responses from 12 participants indicated that their children had experienced more than one type of ECE, whereas seven participants exclusively enrolled their children in nurseries. Moreover, five participants enrolled their children in a bilingual school, three chose various other schools, and two selected 'child corners'. Child corners are centres that were established for the provision of ECE in areas with limited access to such education, enrolling children while only charging a minimal fee to cater for children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Ministry of Social Development, 2023).

When asked whether ECE assisted in school readiness, among 46 participants, a substantial majority of 42 (91.3%) acknowledged the beneficial role of education in supporting their child to start compulsory education. In comparison, a minority of four participants (8.7%) reported no significant impact.

The final quantitative question aimed to investigate whether changes can be made to enhance readiness. In response, out of 49 participants, 40 (81.63%) said yes, suggesting changes could be made, while nine participants (18.37%) held a contrary view.

This section suggests that while the majority of children had access to ECE, there remains a minority who did not receive any form of ECE. Furthermore, while a significant proportion of participants acknowledged the beneficial role of ECE, some perceived no significant impact. Finally, the majority of participants suggest that changes can be made to improve children's transition to compulsory education.

Qualitative Analysis

Categories and themes were developed from the qualitative data (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Gray, 2018). NVIVO software was utilised to manage the data analysis process. Given that data collection was conducted in Arabic, translation into English was necessary to write this research, followed by the identification of recurring patterns to form themes. The process involved iterative steps, going back and forth to the raw data to ensure accuracy and thorough analysis.

Four categories were developed from this content analysis: *school readiness perspectives*, *supportive factors for school readiness*, *challenges to school readiness* and *the impact of ECE on school readiness*. Themes were developed within each category. The first category, school readiness perspectives, yielded four themes, the *conceptualisation of school readiness*, discussions about the *knowledge and expectations for children starting Grade One*, exploring *parents' role when children start Grade One* and *parents-teachers' perspectives on school readiness*.

The second category, supportive factors for school readiness, suggests that *parents, teachers* and *schools* are important factors in school readiness. Themes developed under the third category, challenges to school readiness, include *the readiness gap observed among children starting school* and *challenges observed in school readiness*. Finally, themes that emerged from the fourth category ECE and school readiness include *factors influencing decisions to enrol in ECE* and the *perceived benefits of ECE*.

School Readiness Perspectives

In order to form an in-depth analysis of participants' interpretations of the term school readiness, they were asked for their perceptions on what it means. Various responses were received, leading to the development of four key subthemes under the theme of *school readiness conceptualisation*. Moreover, key *knowledge and expectations* were identified on what children should know and be able to do when they start Grade One. Additionally, Participants were asked to discuss their *expectations as parents* when their children start Grade One. Finally, similarities and differences between perceived *teachers' and parents' perceptions of school readiness* were explored from the parents' perspectives.

School Readiness Conceptualisation

Participants offered diverse perspectives on school readiness, emphasising four key factors: ready children, parents, schools and teachers. These perspectives developed illustrates that school readiness exist within social constructs, where meanings are developed through the interactions of various actors existing within a context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985).

The findings suggest that ready children, parents, schools and teachers are interpreted in multifaceted ways, collectively generating 87 definitions of school readiness. This section presents the findings on school readiness conceptualisation.

Forty participants defined school readiness as the *readiness of children* themselves for school, emphasising several contributing factors. Factors identified, include, *children's attitudes towards school*, emphasised, for example, by the expression of enthusiasm for school and learning. Moreover, *mental and psychological readiness*, reflecting children's ability to manage challenges and adapt to the demands of school. Participants also recognised *ECE* as a crucial factor in defining school readiness, considering children with ECE experiences more ready than their peers. *Child developmental skills* were also identified, characterised by physical and maturity readiness, as well as social and emotional readiness. *Academic readiness* was also noted, highlighting the importance of literacy and numeracy skills. Finally, adaptability to the transition to school was

emphasised, suggesting that readiness involve children's ability to adapt and adjust to the transition to formal schooling.

Thirty-five participants acknowledged their crucial role in defining school readiness. They contributed various interpretations for ready parents. They emphasised the importance of preparing children mentally and psychologically for the transition to formal schooling. This involves various means, such as communicating the significance of education and familiarising them with the school environment. Furthermore, participants stressed the role of parents in providing necessary resources to facilitate readiness, such as school supplies and supportive activities. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of enrolling children in ECE to familiarise them with education. Finally, participants stressed the significance of academic preparation, by teaching children language fundamentals and numeracy.

Eight participants contributed insights into the concept of school readiness from the viewpoint of ready schools, at an institutional level. Their conceptualisation primarily revolved around the provision of essential resources needed to accommodate children, including personnel, administrative infrastructure and financial resources. Additionally, their definition extended to include various aspects of the school environment, including facilities, curriculum design, induction process, welcoming rituals, teacher training programmes and safety protocols.

Three participants provided their interpretations of 'ready teachers', centring teachers as essential actors in the definition of school readiness. Their definitions highlighted the importance of maintaining consistent communication with parents, ensuring the well-being of the children, and emphasising the teachers' psychological readiness to navigate various circumstances.

In this research context, school readiness is defined involving the interplay of ready children, parents, schools, and teachers. The findings suggest that the conceptualisation of school readiness is influenced by various stakeholders contributing to different social and cultural factors situated within a construct, necessitating a comprehensive approach towards school readiness.

Knowledge and Expectations for Children Starting Grade One

Several key areas were highlighted, including academic knowledge; familiarity with the school systems, facilities and safety measures; personal competencies and understanding of schools' purpose. Twenty participants highlighted the importance of academic knowledge, including reading and writing in

both Arabic and English, numeracy skills, and knowledge of essential science concepts.

Nine participants emphasised the significance of practical knowledge about the school, including aspects such as the school premises layout, bus routes, school personnel, and classroom resources. Participant 8 stated:

P8: '[Children should recognise] the nature of the school and its rules, the school environment, [know] the teaching and administration personnel, [understand] school discipline, engagements with peers, the ability to utilise school facilities, using school buses and adhering to safety measures.'

Additionally, eight participants stressed the importance of life skills and personal competencies, such as effective communication, confidence, conflict resolution, self-reliance and appropriate behaviour. Moreover, four participants highlighted the importance of having a positive attitude towards school, learning, and knowledge of teachers, to ensure success when starting Grade One.

According to the findings in this section, the primary key factors contributing to children's readiness for school include academic knowledge, familiarity with school systems and facilities, personal competencies, and understanding of schools' purpose. Academic knowledge and knowledge related to school remain the central focus in this data.

Parental Expectations for Children Starting Grade One

Participants identified five key expectations for parents of children starting Grade One: supporting their children; instilling a positive attitude towards schooling; familiarising them with the school environment; enrolling children in ECE; and fostering effective communication and collaboration with teachers.

Thirty-one participants stressed the importance of parental role in supporting children's readiness. This includes assisting with schoolwork, managing school routines, facilitating school transition, offering psychological support, and providing financial assistance for school supplies. Nine participants highlighted the importance of instilling a positive attitude towards school through various means, including motivating children and fostering a love for school, education, and learning, quoting participant 35: **P35:** '[We should] encourage him not to be scared about starting school, explaining that he will have a teacher who likes him, and he will make friends and enjoy school.'

Additionally, six participants emphasised the importance of parents introducing their children to the school environment through activities like visiting the premises, discussing the school system, and preparing

children for the transition with necessary resources. Communication and collaboration with teachers and enrolling children in ECE were mentioned once each.

The key findings addressed in this section suggest that expectations placed on parents to ensure school readiness include supporting children through various means, instilling a positive attitude towards schooling, familiarising them with the school environment, enrolling children in ECE and fostering effective communication and collaboration with teachers.

Parents' and Teachers' Differing Perspectives on School Readiness

When asked about the alignment or differences between parents' and teachers' perceptions of school readiness, 18 participants shared their varied responses. However, there was a consensus among participants that parents tend to prioritise emotional, psychological, mental, and physical well-being, whereas teachers typically focus on children's educational attainments. For example, Participant 38 stated:

P38: 'I think the perceptions are not that different between teachers and parents. However, parents might be more inclined to prioritise emotional needs, while teachers are more intellectually guided and scientific.'

Nonetheless, both parents and teachers consider academic achievement crucial, as noted by participant 35:

P35: 'The similarities, in my opinion, are related to wanting children to learn to read and write and become self-reliant.'

However, it is crucial to be aware that this perspective is specific to the parents interviewed, which emphasises a hermeneutic approach towards exploring school readiness.

Supportive Factors for School Readiness

Participants who agreed with the quantitative question on the importance of ready parents and schools were asked a follow-up question to provide an explanation. Under ready schools, responses predominantly distinguished ready schools from ready teachers. Parents, teachers, and schools emerged as codes, highlighting their crucial role in fostering school readiness.

Subthemes developed in this section suggest that ready parents are the ones that are actively involved with their children before, during and after they start compulsory education. This involvement is characterised by working closely with their children or focusing on working on themselves to facilitate readiness. Participants highlighted eight key factors, developed as subthemes in this section.

Twenty-five participants stated that they focus on supporting their children's learning by teaching essential skills at home, such as academic skills, pencil grip, independence, and communication skills. Moreover, they work on time management, understanding school expectations, and creating an educational environment within their home. For 23 participants, familiarising children with the school environment and requirements was considered crucial. This was emphasised through understanding curriculum and assessment requirements. Seventeen participants stressed the importance of enrolling children in ECE to support readiness, which includes learning essential academic knowledge and fostering independence.

Additionally, 14 participants engaged in various preparatory activities, such as purchasing school supplies. Nine participants prioritised providing emotional support, to ensure their children's mental well-being. Eight participants emphasised the importance of fostering open communication and collaboration with teachers. Moreover, three participants viewed continuous learning and development for parents as essential to support readiness, while another three participants perceived parental financial readiness as crucial, considering the costs of school preparation.

Participants identified six key factors essential for ready teachers. Nineteen of them addressed the importance of creating a nurturing learning environment tailored to the diverse needs and backgrounds of children. Participant 17 shared their perspective, stating: **P17:** 'Teachers should adapt their approach to first-grade pupils, considering their knowledge, personalities and backgrounds, and fostering a love for learning and knowledge. In essence, they should create an environment akin to kindergarten, recognising that not all children have had the opportunity to attend any form of preschool, which is a valuable year for their development.'

Fourteen participants stressed the significance of employing effective teaching practices and curriculum delivery. Positive reinforcement also emerged as a crucial factor, with 11 participants noting the importance of encouragement and incentives from teachers. Nine participants focused on the importance of professional development and leadership qualities, emphasising the need for age-appropriate training that caters to children's needs. Additionally, establishing welcoming rituals, ensuring teachers' mental readiness and establishing collaboration and communication with parents were identified as crucial factors in teachers' readiness.

In this section, participants identified five key factors aimed at improving children's readiness to start Grade One. Seventeen participants emphasised the importance of enhancing pedagogical practices, focusing on teaching tools, creating engaging learning

experiences, and integrating psychology to foster healthy school relationship. Participant 33 articulated:

P33: '[It is] providing training and various qualifications for school staff, including subject-specific training, welcoming and accommodating pupils, addressing and resolving different challenges and instilling strong sense of professional ethics in the teaching profession.'

Nine participants highlighted the crucial role of compulsory ECE in shaping children's personalities and reducing challenges in primary school, thus suggesting its adoption in public schools. Two participants suggested the implementation of an induction week with welcoming rituals to facilitate the school transition. Moreover, inclusive practices and providing training for parents were each mentioned once as strategies to improve the overall children's transition experience.

Challenges to School Readiness

While school readiness is recognised to have various influence on children, research suggests that it comes with various challenges (Britto, 2012; Heckman, 2013; Meisels, 1998). Participants who agreed with this statement in the quantitative question were asked a follow-up question to explain challenges children encounter. Responses emerged resulting in two themes, *readiness gap observed among children starting school* and *challenges observed in school readiness*.

Children's readiness for school is influenced by a variety of factors stemming from diverse backgrounds and learning experiences. Participants identified six key factors contributing to readiness gaps: variability in home support; individual differences; the lack of access to ECE; socioeconomic disparity; limited school support; and attitudes towards education. Nineteen participants emphasised the crucial role of home support, stressing the adverse impact of the lack of encouragement and assistance in learning. Twelve participants emphasised individual differences as a significant challenge, acknowledging also the impact of diverse backgrounds and variations in early childhood development.

Additionally, nine participants attributed readiness gaps to limited or lack of ECE experiences, while seven participants identified socioeconomic disparity as a factor contributing to readiness gap. Moreover, limited school support for children and attitudes towards education, characterised by factors such as parental disinterest in the learning process, were each mentioned by four participants as crucial factors affecting readiness and contributing to the observed gaps.

Participants identified six key factors related to challenges children face with school readiness. Nine participants stressed academic challenges, particularly difficulties in literacy. Eight participants mentioned

challenges in adjusting to the school environment, navigate diverse teacher personalities, and assimilating into a large group of pupils. Participant 30 explained:

P30: 'It involves challenges in reading, writing, being accepted by other children and facing bullying.'

The lack of social skills was identified as a challenge by six participants. Five participants expressed concerns about teachers' attitudes and readiness to receive children, including challenges in managing the age group and adopting ineffective approaches. Anxiety and the lack of inclusive practices were each mentioned twice as additional challenges children encounter with school readiness.

Early Childhood Education and School Readiness

The influence of ECE on school readiness is well-documented in various research (Britto, 2012; Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Brown, 2010; Dockett *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, participants were asked about their reasons for enrolling their children in ECE. Additionally, they were asked about the ways in which ECE supported their children. Thus, this section explores the findings emerged on the significant role of ECE in preparing children for compulsory education. It presents the *factors influencing parents' decisions to enrol their children in ECE* and the *perceived benefits of ECE in enhancing school readiness*.

Participants who enrolled their children in ECE identified four key factors contributing to their decision: adaptation to the school environment; fostering academic competencies; facilitating a smooth school transition; and providing a preferable alternative to staying at home. Thirty participants stressed the essential role of ECE in helping children adapt to the school environment. Eleven participants emphasised the importance of academic preparation provided by ECE, particularly considering the demands of Grade One. Moreover, three participants highlighted ECE's role in facilitating the transition to school and offering an alternative to staying at home. Participant 3 shared their perceptive, stating:

P3: 'He gets to understand the school system and the school environment. He gets to interact with his peers, make friends and acquires skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.'

Additionally, ECE offers several advantages, as highlighted by participants in this research. Academic readiness was highlighted by 18 participants, who noted that ECE equips children with essential skills in reading, writing, and basic knowledge. Twelve participants acknowledged ECE's role in facilitating a smooth transition to formal education, fostering adaptability and academic achievement. Moreover, 10 participants emphasised ECE's positive impact on children's emotional and social development, fostering confidence and independence. In addition, five participants cited

ECE's positive influence on their children's attitudes towards school, demonstrating enthusiasm, attentiveness, and a love for learning. To summarise, Participant 26 captured some of these benefits:

P26: '[My child started school] confident and independent. He was familiar with how to interact with teachers and adapt, as he navigated multiple teachers in his previous school. He is well-prepared to read, write and in numeracy.'

The findings suggest that ECE plays a critical role in supporting school readiness by academically preparing children for the demands of compulsory education and supporting their social and emotional development. Consequently, parents choose to enrol their children in ECE, recognising its multifaceted benefits.

DISCUSSION

School Readiness Perspectives: Collaboration among Parents, Educators and Institutions, and Children's Academic Expectations

In this research, various interpretations of school readiness have emerged, suggesting that the concept constitutes not only ready children, but also ready parents, schools, and teachers. Similar to existing research, school readiness is defined with the interplay of different stakeholders, as argued by Britto (2012); Graue (1992); Moss (2013) and Kagan (1990). Echoing the conceptualisation proposed by international bodies such as UNICEF, which emphasising the importance of three key dimensions: ready schools, ready families and ready children as highlighted by Britto (2012) and Britto and Limlingan (2012), with teachers being crucial to the notion of ready schools.

This research also reveals the existence of expectations placed upon children as they start compulsory education, where their knowledge and skills profoundly shape their readiness. Notably, in a context where ECE remains optional and predominantly privatised, academic proficiency and familiarity with the school system are considered crucial for readiness. Children face academic demands without adequate preparation. The findings resonates with contemporary trends in early childhood pedagogy, which increasingly prioritise academic practices over play-based approaches, in response to academic demands of compulsory education, as suggested by Kinkead-Clark (2021) and Ring and O'Sullivan (2018).

Furthermore, as proposed by Pianta, Cox, and Snow (2007), the educationalisation of ECE further emphasises the expectation for children to bring specific skills and knowledge upon starting compulsory education journey. While this concept was primarily put forward in the US context, the shift toward an academic-centric paradigm reflects a global trend, where ECE serves as a preparatory phase for compulsory education,

as discussed by Formosinho (2021) and Moss (2013). Moreover, ECE is increasingly recognised as a strategic investment in future economic growth, viewed through a human capital lens by organisations such as The World Bank (2021), The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) and scholars like Heckman (2013), suggesting its capability in fostering socioeconomic development.

Supportive Factors: The Combined Efforts of Supportive Parents, Collaborative Teachers, and Enhanced Pedagogical Practices

This research suggests that school readiness is socially constructed, emphasising its multifaceted nature and the various factors influencing it, similarly echoed by Britto (2012); Dockett and Perry (2002, 2009) and Graue (1992). It presents insights into the role of parents, teachers, and schools in facilitating readiness. Particularly, the significance of parental involvement in supporting children, fostering a nurturing learning environment by teachers, and the improvement of pedagogical practices in schools.

Parental support emerged as a crucial component in the readiness process, aligning with various research, such as Britto (2012); Lau and Power (2018); Puccioni (2018); Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) and Graue (1992). Teaching various skills, supporting learning at home, as well as familiarising children with school expectations, and facilitating ECE, are all identified as important parental roles in supporting school readiness.

Likewise, teachers play an important role in supporting school readiness through providing a nurturing learning environment, effective teaching strategies, positive reinforcement, ongoing professional development and collaborative efforts with parents. These findings echo existing research that stress the important role teachers have in facilitating school readiness through various practice (Britto, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Perry, Dockett, & Petriwskyj, 2014).

According to the participants, the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding school readiness reveal different priorities, with parents emphasising children's well-being and teachers prioritising educational attainment. This dichotomy highlights the complexity between parental expectations and educational imperatives. However, this research indicates that parents still view readiness from an academic lens, perpetuated by the demands placed on their children when they start compulsory education. Additionally, teachers must meet the demands of a curriculum that also prioritises academic achievement, with the trend of increased demands set by education authorities (Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Timmons, Pyle, Daniels, Cowan, & Mccann, 2022).

Schools in this research are emphasised for their role in supporting readiness. By enhancing pedagogical practices, implementing welcoming rituals that facilitate children's transition to school, the provision of inclusive practices and parental training initiatives, schools contribute significantly to readiness, similarly argued by Britto and Limlingan (2012); Bruwer, Hartell, and Steyn (2014); Karabulut (2013) and Arnold *et al.*, (2006).

Challenges: Social Skills, School Adjustment, and Academic Readiness

Challenges with school readiness represent a significant concern, affecting many children as they start compulsory education. Indeed, this research reveals that 69.09% of participants report their children facing readiness challenges. These challenges are various, including the lack of academic knowledge, difficulties adjusting to school, poor social skills and general well-being as well as anxiety and limited inclusive practices.

Building upon existing literature (Britto, 2012; Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Rouse *et al.*, 2023), it becomes apparent that these challenges are a widespread issue faced by children across various contexts. From diverse ECE experiences to varying levels of educational support and access to resources, children start compulsory education with varying levels of knowledge and needs, which significantly influence their readiness. Research suggests that children lacking equal access to quality ECE are disproportionately affected (Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Lohndorf, Vermeer, Harpe, & Mesman, 2021; Puccioni, 2015). Additionally, Tager (2017) argues that this unequal start could continue to produce disparities in academic achievements, social integration and overall well-being. Consequently, worsening the challenges associated with school readiness.

Moreover, addressing challenges through children's readiness to meet compulsory education requirements entails looking at readiness through a developmental lens, which places a heavy burden on children. This approach establishes a deficit interpretation when children do not fit into the external expectations (Rouse *et al.*, 2023). This research suggests that school readiness is not linear, instead it is the interplay of various challenges existing within a social and cultural context.

Early Childhood Education: An Issue of Accessibility and Equality

In exploring the persistent gap in school readiness, it is crucial to delve into the multifaceted interplay of factors involved, particularly ECE. ECE is viewed as crucial in supporting children's readiness in this research, equally emphasised in literature (Bakken, Brown, & Downing, 2017; Britto, 2012; Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Gillanders & Kantor, 2019; Heckman, 2013; Reynolds, Rolnick, & Temple, 2014). The benefits

acknowledged are supporting academic readiness, facilitating smooth school transition, nurturing emotional and social development, and fostering a positive attitude towards school. Participants still shared their various motivations behind enrolling their children in ECE programmes, emphasising the desire to support school adaptation, improve academic competencies, facilitate smooth transition, as well as perceiving ECE as a better alternative to spending time at home.

However, despite the acknowledgment of the benefits of ECE where 91.3% participants shared that ECE has a positive impact on readiness in laying the foundation for academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being, this research reveals a persistent gap in readiness among children starting compulsory education in public education, even among those who have received some form of ECE, similar to Britto and Limlingan (2012). Addressing the persistent gap is necessary. This involves not only ensuring equitable access to high quality ECE, but also addressing the multifaceted socioeconomic and cultural factors, as well as the provision of support and resources that impact children's readiness.

Limitations and Recommendations:

While this research contributes valuable insights into school readiness within the context of Oman, an area that is relatively under-researched, it comes with a limitation. The limitation is methodological, and it is related to the sample size. Initially, the survey started with 124 participants, but eventually dropped to 49, a 60.48% decrease for closed-ended questions and 34, a 72.58% decrease for open-ended questions. Consequently, the response rate was 39.52% for closed-ended questions and 27.42% for open-ended questions, which could potentially introduce bias. The attrition rate may be attributed to the extensive number of questions, with 18 closed-ended questions and 17 open-ended questions, particularly considering the additional time required to respond to open-ended questions compared to closed-ended questions. However, it is worth noting that the open-ended questions produced more in-depth data that directly addressed the research questions.

As a direction for future research, it is recommended to further explore parents' perceptions of school readiness, employing qualitative approaches, such as focus groups or interviews. These methods are suitable for capturing comprehensive insights. Additionally, research into the disparities among children starting compulsory education is recommended. Future research should be directed towards existing disparities in access to ECE and evaluate its implications for readiness for on compulsory education.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the ongoing discourses surrounding school readiness within the context of ECE. It offers insights into parents' perceptions on school readiness in Grade One school readiness in the context of Oman. It explores several key aspects, including the conceptualisation of school readiness, supportive factors, encountered challenges and the impact of ECE.

The findings emphasise the complexity of defining school readiness, acknowledging its multifaceted nature, influenced by stakeholders such as children, parents, schools, and teachers. Children's readiness is conceptualised by expectations to start school equipped with a set of skills, academic knowledge, and familiarity with the school system. Despite the expectations placed on children to start school ready, they continue to face challenges in meeting those demands. These challenges include limited academic knowledge, struggle with school adjustment, poor social skills and a lack of inclusive practices in schools.

Furthermore, the educationalisation of ECE stresses the crucial role of this stage as a preparation for compulsory education, emphasising the need for children to have specific skills and knowledge upon entering school. However, while ECE emerges as crucial in supporting children's readiness, adaptation to school environment, academic competency, supporting children's well-being, and a better school transition experience, disparities in access to ECE persist.

Shedding light on socioeconomic and cultural factors, as well as access to resource, to the lack of access to high-quality ECE is crucial in narrowing the readiness gap and promoting equitable access. Addressing the complex nature of school readiness and the process of transitioning to compulsory education from diverse early childhood experiences requires collaborative efforts from parents, teachers, and schools, to ensure children thrive and receive equal support.

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Appendix 1: participants' information and survey questions

Parents' Perceptions of School Readiness in Grade One in Oman

You are invited to participate in a study on school readiness in Oman. You can get back to me if you have any queries or if you require any extra information on: *****. It is important that you understand all the information here before you decide to take part in this study.

- This study aims at exploring the perception of parents of Grade One school children enrolled in public schools in Oman on school readiness.
- You can contribute if you are a father or a mother of a child who is in Grade One in Oman.
- This study is conducted by *****
- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- This study involves completing an online survey.
- Your responses will be confidential.

This survey takes around 15-20 minutes to complete.

- Yes, I consent
- No, I do not consent

(If the answer is no the survey will discontinue here)

I am a:

- Mother
- Father

How old are you:

- 24 and younger
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64

Your education level:

- Primary education
- Secondary/diploma
- Bachelor education
- Postgraduate education

Do you have a child who is in Grade One in a public school in Oman?

- Yes
- No

(If the answer is no the survey will discontinue here)

Parents' construct of school readiness:

The following questions will ask you about your perceptions of school readiness concept. Please respond to each question. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. As a parent, have you ever heard the term "school readiness"?

- Yes
- No

2. In your opinion, what do you think the term "school readiness" means? Can you explain.

Parents' interpretations of school readiness:

The following questions are on parents' interpretations of school readiness. Please respond to each question. There are no right or wrong.

3. Do you think your child was ready for school when he/she started Grade One?

- Yes
- No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 5)

4. How did you know that your child is ready for school?
5. What do you think children need to know when starting school?
6. Did you do anything to support your child in being ready for school when they started Grade One?
 - Yes
 - No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 8)

7. Can you explain what you have done to support your child's readiness for school?
8. Do you think that you as a parent need to be ready for school?
 - Yes
 - No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 10)

9. Can you explain how you, as a parent, need to be ready?
10. Do you think that the schools, including the school staff, need to be ready?
 - Yes
 - No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 12)

11. Can you explain more about your conception of ready schools?

Support, expectations, and challenges:

The following questions are on support, expectations, and challenges in relation to school readiness. There are no right or wrong answers.

12. What did the school expect from your child when they started Grade One?
13. What is expected from you as a parent when your child starts Grade One?
14. Do you think teachers have different perceptions of what school readiness is compared to you? Can you explain.
15. Did your child experience any challenges when starting school?
 - Yes
 - No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 17)

16. What are these challenges?
17. What support did your child receive from school to help them with starting Grade One?

Early experiences:

The following questions are on your child's experiences before starting compulsory education. There are no right or wrong answers.

18. Why do you think some children are ready for school and some are not?
19. Did your child receive early childhood education?
 - Yes
 - No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 23)

20. What early education did they receive:

- Quran school
- Bilingual school
- Kindergarten
- Child corner
- Nursery
- Children's development houses
- More than one type of education, what was it:
- Other, explain:

21. Why did you decide to enrol them into early childhood education?
22. Do you think that early childhood education supported your child in Grade One?
 - Yes
 - No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 24)

23. How did early childhood education support your child in Grade One?

Changes:

24. Do you think that anything can be improved or changed to make children's experience of the school transition to Grade One better?

Yes

No

(If the answer is no the survey will take the participant to question 26)

25. What can be improved or changed?

26. Would you like to add anything?

Thank you for contributing to this survey.