ASSESSING PERCEPTION AND ACTION OF PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND SCHOOL LEADERS ON SCHOOL READINESS. A CASE OF MTWARA REGION-TANZANIA

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Abstract: School readiness as a concept has been there for a long period of time but has gained attention in the last few years. The perception of parents, teachers and school leaders on school readiness are very important to determine the extent to which children are ready to enter in the school setting. Therefore, this study specifically examines the perceptions and actions of parents, teachers, and school leaders on school readiness and how they contribute to the smooth transformation of children into school settings in Mtwara Region-Tanzania. However, many studies have been done on school readiness and many of them focused much on educational result oriented rather that system and mechanical oriented. Furthermore, this research has used qualitative methods such as online survey (interview, questionnaire and web search), document analysis. The result of this findings demonstrates that there is a need of the government intervention toward understanding of school readiness to parents, teachers, and school leaders. 70 percent of the teachers, parents and school leaders are not aware of the learning autonomous, therefore through this study the government should start to formulate and implement learning autonomous and online studies particularly in tragedy pandemic era such as Covid-19.

Key words: *school readiness; perceptions; childhood; learning autonomous; Tanzania.*

INTRODUCTION.

This part will discuss the background of the study, importance and implication of the study as well as research question as demonstrated bellow; -

Given the significance of school readiness, the global ratification of Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) has increased commitment for all countries in the world to invest in early childhood education and make it as the basic rights to all children (Wolf et al., 2017). Basically, investing in Early childhood education is something any country in the world can do for the socio and economic developments return in future. In order to achieve the stated goals, governments and other policymakers are encouraged to create an atmosphere that promotes children's learning and development (Mtahabwa, 2010). The number of studies has pointed out that, first early 5 years of children development are the most fundamental for the overall construction of the whole child (Ladd et al., 2006), this is due largely to the fact that all domains of school readiness mostly are reflected in these periods.

Many parents are struggling to get their children into school as soon as possible. Yet, to know what time is appropriate for the children to be ready to start school might be a challenge to some of the parents (Carlton & Winsler, 1999), since some parents only knows that children become ready for school immediately after they reach the ages that the governments recommends in educational policies. School readiness provide a picture of levels of children development reached. Therefore, school readiness is not only about cognitive abilities but also all early abilities and behaviors in

multiple domains of their development that largely determine transformation from home to school learning environment (Hatcher et al., 2012).

In Tanzania, each year children are enrolled in both public and private elementary schools for learning. Though there is no universal understanding of what is school readiness, but in Tanzania, educational police indicate that children aged 5 years are ready for school and should be enrolled to pre-primary education, while children before the age of 5 years must be enrolled in elementary schools if they meet some criteria of school readiness mentioned in the educational policy. Several writings have found that, failing to conceptualize child readiness criteria among teachers, parents and other caregivers might affect the performances of children when engaging with kindergarten school. Although, consideration of ages as a criterion for children readiness to school system might be a good standard for school readiness, though it will not be compatible when assessing the varying domains of child development (Puccioni, 2018).

Many parents, teachers and school leaders are struggling to discover what it means to be ready for school. Therefore, understanding the concept of school readiness to all early childhood stakeholders including parents kindergarten teachers and school leaders help to improve early childhood educational policies and programs, help to extend abilities and skills of the children and perhaps promote and improve social and emotional development of children (Ohle & Harvey, 2019). Though, some of the parents perceive school readiness as only when they observe children have an ability to count some of the numbers such as one up to five, sometimes having an ability to mention their names (Desmangles, 2018), while when assessing children readiness involve considerations of multiple aspects that comprise children development as whole such as Cognitive/intellectual development, physical development, social development and emotional development (Xie & Gan, 2017).

Upon entrance to school system, children need to be assessed in term of their abilities regarding all domains of their developments and their assessment are very important to assure parents and teachers that children are ready to enter in the school system. Solari (2014) argue that assessing school readiness, various criteria need to be considered, though many schools consider children's ages as the most criteria for children entrance to the school, however their readiness depend much on the readiness of the educators, family, system, communities and readiness of the school.

Discussion on the definition of school readiness;

Despite of several scholars who wrote about school readiness, still the concept has got no single universal definition. There has been a number of studies attempted to understand the concept of school readiness, Fridani (2014); Harris (1999); Kagitcibasi (2004); Lin et al., (2003); Wesley & Buysse (2003), Ladd et al. (2006,); Magdalena (2014); Romano et al. (2010); Carlton & Winsler (1999), though in an attempt to reach the broader meaning, school readiness has been viewed in a multiple aspect of children developments. Theories of child developments perceive school readiness as the abilities that children have related with multiple dimensions of developments such as cognitive developments, social, language and motor (Setiawati, F., Izzaty, R., Triyanto, 2017). Similarly, to Piaget's cognitive theory of development who viewed school readiness in a level of development as it is closely linked with the hierarchical stages of development including sensor-motor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

The definition of school readiness is distinguished from the varying domains of child developments. Thus, school readiness is used as a scale to measure the level of preparedness of children to adhere school requirements (Magdalena, 2014). Although, to examine the predictive outcomes of the child's school readiness, it is evident that children who enter school with some of the prior basic academic skills are likely to have success academically and to their whole life in particular. However, assessing aspects of children development in relation to school readiness will help educational stakeholders to make policies and take some basic information on the areas of interventions.

The importance of this study is to explore and promote some strategies that foster school readiness as well as promoting social and emotional development of children as a critical foundation for school readiness. Also, the study helps to explore the influence of parental behaviors that affect children's developments and early learning. The study proves to be an important study in the area of parenting and will serve as a basis for future research in this area.

In other way, the objectives of the study are to assess the individual levels of understanding on the concept of school readiness to parents, teachers and school leaders to explore and examine different domains of children development that are perceived by teachers and parents, to explore the parental skills and behaviors that have an impact to early learning to children, to examine on how different parenting styles and parent characteristics influence children readiness to school, to evaluate children early learning as the result of parenting to children readiness to school.

Statement of the problem.

In the research conducted by Kinlaw et al., (2001), argue that children's readiness to school are often affected much by the ethnic background of their mothers. But parent's behaviors and teachers practice such as task persistence, attention, creativity, initiative, curiosity and problem-solving skills, influence much to children's attitude that are likely to affect their later academic performances either positively or negatively. Furthermore, parental positive affection to children and other relatives within a family have a great contribution towards the future academic success of the children and the life in particular. Likewise, the life status of the family can be a determinant factor to the later academic success of their children since the families that are able to provide all basic needs to their children are likely to make their children have success in later academic achievements than those disadvantaged families (Not et al., 2006).

    Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions;
1. What are the perceptions of parents, teachers and school leaders on school readiness?
2. What are the aspects and indicators for school readiness for kindergarten children?
3. What are the parenting behaviors and practices that promotes children readiness to school?
4. What are the school readiness indicators do parents and teachers report that their children use to engage?

The study encountered some challenges including time as a major constraint, sample of the population chosen for the study is firmly limited to Mtwara region, the authenticity of the data depends on the honesty and willingness of the participants. Likewise, the research encountered difficultness in data collection due to Covid-19 pandemic and digital challenges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 **Theoretical discussion**, this part will discuss more about parents, school readiness, teacher's perceptions on school readiness, childhood and learning autonomous as demonstrated below: -

2.1.1. **Parents**

Parents are the important figures in the whole development of children, they are regarded as the first teachers who teach all subject when it comes to the issues of children rearing. Usually, a positive relationship between parents and children contributes to children's adaptations to school and social competencies on elementary schools and other levels of education. A number of interventions have been made and found to be effective that parents-child relationship is among of the effective way in promoting school readiness. In developing cognitive and social emotional domains, parents seem to be true, active and supportive through conversations, telling stories and presenting new vocabulary words, asking and answering children's questions (Pfannenstiel et al., 2003).

Families are the important elements for children to reach out school demands. Though there are still few findings that found how parental educational status in the level of parenting affect children's later academic achievements. However, the relationship between father and mother in the family play a vital contribution towards children readiness and latter early academic achievement. Parenting style and all family behaviors also both have positive and negative effects to children's achievements (Rytkönen et al., 2005). Therefore, to achieve full potential, there is a need for the children to have multiple interaction including their environment and perhaps help them to develop cognitively and socially.

2.1.2. **Teacher's perceptions on school readiness**

Kindergarten teacher are the one who integrate children to the world of learning acting as the bridge in acquisitions of knowledge and skills towards children. Because teachers are the one who

realize the abilities and all qualification in children's successful transition to school settings, therefore their perception and understandings on school readiness is important for children's latter academic success.

Several studies has found that teachers perceptions on school readiness varies and are largely shaped by the school structure in a certain school, communities that around them, school teaching and learning environments and the geographical locations of the schools where teacher use to teach (Lin et al., 2003). Also, teacher's educational status and teaching experience is among of the causing factor for varying teacher's perceptions on school readiness.

2.1.3. School readiness.

The concept of school readiness is widely known as the specific individual characteristics in the standards of physical, social emotional developments and intellectual developments that enable an individual child to abide with the school requirements. Unfortunately, there is no any international standards to define readiness of the children for school though there are some ideas concerning school readiness which seems to be shared universally (Baker, 2015). There are various studies that have showed academic achievements of the children as the measure of the school readiness; however, the measures and standards of school readiness are still debatable.

Commonly, school readiness is about children's early signs of cognitive ability, social and physical skills. School readiness is characterized by the readiness of the individual child, readiness of the whole community and the family in particular. Both teacher, school leaders and family behaviours are the important elements to determine the success of the children in both academic and life in particular. According to High et al., 2008, Children's readiness need to be a community based programs in such a way that all people need to be involved in all progresses of educational systems, rather than an exclusion. This basically led the government to formulate and enact good policies and programs that focus to improve the learning outcomes of the children in their further studies.

2.1.4. Childhood.

School readiness is more than academics. Usually, readiness of the children depends on the early support from the parents, teacher and the communities to children. The importance of early childhood developments and the changes of educational policies has made many researchers to find out the meaning of school readiness. Regardless of the varying areas of skills, early childhood assessment developments are important to provide information about child readiness for school and perhaps help to know the best instruction and interaction that are appropriate for children learning (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006).

Basically, childhood refers to the basic stage of human development from birth to adult stage. This is a stage of remarkable brain development starting from birth to approximate 6-8 years of ages. Childhood experiences have tremendous impacts to the development of children as whole covering physical, cognitive and socio-emotional developments (Daelmans et al., 2017).

2.1.5. Learning autonomous.

On the issue of learning autonomous, the study has indicated that, only few parents, teachers and school leaders are aware on the important and application of learning autonomous as an alternative learning system particularly during this pandemic era of Covid-19.

This research demonstrated that, 70% of respondents are not aware on the use and application of learning autonomous. Meanwhile, only 30% respondents wrote and demonstrated that they understood the concept and application of autonomous learning in their field. Learning autonomous can be defined as the form of learning where by children has self-learning autonomous and control on their children, here teachers, parents and other children stakeholders remain to be only a guidance and instructors.

2.2. Theories

Theory is the load map or a set of ideas of a specific phenomenon. Basically, theories provide a concise insight about children development in relation to school readiness within the context of families, community and school settings. This part will discuss on the theories that guide the study.

2.2.1. Developmental *theories*

The concept of *readiness* has been justifiable from the developmental *theories* of Arnold *Gesell.* Arnold Lucius Gesell was among of the pioneer of developmental psychology when

the field was in infancy stage. In relation to school readiness, Gesell's theory of maturation viewed school readiness as an act where children are able to accomplish some prior simple tasks that are required in learning settings. His emphasize was based much on cognitive abilities of the children in the way that all children grow similar in a predictable sequence, with different rate and pace to every child. Therefore, school readiness according to Gesell depend on the changing nature of mental ability of the children.

Similarly, *Piaget's theory appears to be valid in explaining the concept of school readiness.* In Piaget's conceptions, believed that children cannot be taught something beyond their level of maturation and stages of development and the cognitive abilities of the children to learn something, depends much on the level of maturation.

Generally, Piaget's theory tried to explain how living organism adopt to the new environment. Therefore, many programs of pre-schools are largely modeled by the Piaget's theory as it is regarded as a foundation for learning in early childhood education. Basing on school readiness to children, Piaget believed that readiness is largely determined by the different stages of development where children is going through.

3.0. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research. According to (Bengtsson, 2016), qualitative study has an orientation to social context, and the participants usually focus on human subjectivity. The collections of data in this study were limited to some methods due to the precautions of Covid-19 infections. Respondents was willing to provide information regarding the situations in whatever way they were asked for. Related to the data collection, usually observation is being used in order to learn about the phenomena in an education learning system.

The observation is supported by the interview to the teachers, parents and school leaders. Woodsong & Namey (2005) explained that an interview is a technique designed to real picturization of what is happened during the setting of the study. The information collected by this instrument helped the researchers to cross- examine some key issues in the research.

The data collection also being supported by document analysis methods that is done by collecting data from social media, publications, articles, book, and news broadcasting. According to (Bowen, 2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure to review or evaluate document that can be taken from both printed and electronic materials.

Table 1 List of study informants

Name	Age category	Number of participants	Domicile
Parents (P)	From 24^+	11(39.3%)	Mtwara Region
School teachers (T)	From 24^+	9(32.1%)	Mtwara Region
School leaders (SL)	From 24^+	3 (9.7%)	Mtwara Region
Others (O)	From 24^+	7 (18.9%)	Mtwara Region

Narrowing the method to the use of social media as document analysis methods, (Lai & To, 2015) found that social media is very suitable to be a part of document study for supporting a research. It is because social media have already become the most essential part that cannot be separated with human life because it succeeds to affects all elements of human life such as the beliefs, values, and attitudes of people, as well as their intentions and behaviors.

4.0. RESULT AND DISCUSSION.

4.1. Introduction

This section will present the results and discussion of the study regarding the perceptions of parents, teachers and school leaders on school readiness, a case of Mtwara region in Tanzania. All of

these results and discussion is grounded from the research questions asked from various informants from Mtwara region in Tanzania. Therefore, this part will constitute the following subsection; - awareness of parents, school leaders and teacher regarding school readiness, domains of children developments, skills, abilities and experience need to be demonstrated by a child who is ready for school, efforts being done by teachers, parents and school leaders to help children ready for school.

4.1.1. Awareness of parents, school leaders and teacher regarding school readiness.

Several groups of informants were attended in this study, where by the data collected focused much on the informant's study nature, level of education and respondents' perception and awareness on the school readiness. The informants in this study have been categorized into three groups namely; Parents (**P**), Teachers (**T**) and School leaders (**SL**).

This study has used 30 respondents. The results of the questionnaire based on the awareness and perceptions regarding school readiness for both teachers, parents and school leaders indicated how they perceive and are aware of the school readiness. Among of these respondents, 76 percent of both teachers, parents and school leaders aired their perceptions on what is school readiness.

*One of the **SL** respondent, perceive school readiness as "the level of maturity that a child has attained that which paves a way towards her physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social and cognitive development through well-structured platforms/systems". While some respondent perceived school readiness as associated with the specific age category of children, for example one of the **P** said that, school readiness is "the situation of being able to get education in accordance with age".*

*Likewise, 32 percent of **P** attended on the questionnaire concerning the understanding of the concept of school readiness, and one of the teachers said that "school readiness means being ready for school in both children and parents as well as the community at large. For the children we look at the age of the child, willingness of a child and curiosity of a child to learn. For the parents we can simply look at the parent's desire to take their children to school. If we look at the community level, we can assess how culture and tradition can affect the school readiness of a particular community".*

Therefore, basing on these variations of understanding on school readiness, shows clearly that there is an effort needed by the government and other educational stakeholders to help both parents, teachers and school leaders to understand clearly on the meaning and the essence of school readiness to children. This will simplify on the developments and implementation of school policies and programs set by the government.

4.1.2. Domains of School Readiness

It is very important for the teachers, parents and school leaders to know various domains of school readiness such as language and literacy development, cognition and general knowledge (including early mathematics and early scientific development), approaches toward learning, physical well-being and motor development as well as Social and emotional development. These are termed as the main indicators of children's abilities and capabilities for them to be successful in a school setting.

Basing on this study, 11 parents, 9 teacher and 3 school leaders from different settings in Mtwara region responded the questionnaire. According to their perception on the domains of school readiness, still there is a challenge for them to know exactly what are the domains appropriate for school readiness to children. For example, one of the parents used to say domains of school readiness are the "*Conducive learning environment accompanied by many extracurricular activities*" while other said domains of school readiness are "*1. Physical and Motor 2. Language Development 3. Cognitive Development 4. Social and Emotional and 5. Spiritual development*". In addition to that, one of the parents (**P**) commented school readiness domains as the "*Parents awareness, Teachers and community awareness, Government and other school stakeholders*". Therefore, these statements indicate that both teachers, parents and school leaders need help especially in understanding well the concept of school readiness in order to run smoothly the policies and programs of early childhood education.

4.1.3. Skills, abilities and experience need to be demonstrated by a child who is ready for school.

School readiness is when children show some skills, abilities and experiences in some specific areas for school entry requirements. It is from this study where different participants

responded basing on the skills, abilities and experiences that need to be demonstrated by the children who is ready for school.

Children's ability to recognize numbers from 1-10 is among of the key abilities and skills mentioned by most of the parents, teachers and school leaders when asked in this study. According to them, children who have an ability to mention numbers from 1-10 are the one considered to be ready for school. Likewise, children's ability to express their needs and wants was among of the aspect mentioned in this study while aspects such as to recognize three primary shapes, to count 1-20, write their names or letters and to recognize eight primary colors was minimally mentioned in this study by the participants.

4.1.4. Efforts being done by teachers, parents and school leaders to help children ready for school.

It is important to know that educating children should not be shouldered by the teachers alone. It is the responsibility of both teachers, parents, school leaders and the community in general to let their children learn all of the basic education. For the benefit of the children, both teachers, parents and school leaders should work together to find out how the children are doing and where they need help.

Basing on the questions asked to both parents, teachers and school leaders which says "*Do you think is there any efforts being done by teachers, parents and school leaders to help children ready for school?*", 18 percent from 27 respondents said there is enough efforts done by the parents to help children ready for school, and 33 percent of the respondents reported there is enough efforts made by the government but not by the families and the community. Likewise, 37 percent from 27 respondents of this study reported that there are no efforts made by either government, parents, teachers or school leaders to help children ready for school.

Therefore, from these perspectives made by the teachers, parents and school leaders basing on school readiness, shows that the concept of school readiness is not clear to most of parents, teachers and school leaders.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMANDATION

Conclusion

To conclude, this research has argued and demonstrated that understanding of parents, teachers and school leaders on school readiness has a profound impact in the implementation of educational policies and programs especially in the field of early childhood education. However, in Tanzania specifically in Mtwara Region according to this study, the level of understanding on school readiness among parents, teachers and school leaders seems to be low in such a way that the Government and other educational stakeholders need to initiate some effort for easy implementations of policies and programs.

It is clear that the level of understanding among teachers, parents and school leaders on school readiness does not need to be ignored in Tanzania. This will help to have a quality and properly-designed physical environment and policies that basically will boost the development of education in Tanzania and perhaps contribute to a better education system and improved school readiness among children. Likewise, by helping children to achieve their best and develop their fullest potential, school readiness must be a key factor to ensure that preschool children are more ready to school.

Recommendation

To achieve full potential and encourage school readiness, there is a need for the children to have multiple interaction including their environment and perhaps help them to develop cognitively and socially. Similarly, interactive peer play at home are very important as it help children to learn and associate different things that in turn help them to be motivated and have positive attitudes towards schools and later achievements in their academics (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012).

Basing on the basis of school readiness, both parents, school leaders and early childhood teachers need to have an in-depth understanding of the concept of school readiness. This will be achieved immediately after all members of the society to realize that they are responsible to the

welfare of the children. Since we are significantly increasing their chances of success in the future, aspects of school readiness such as social, cognitive, language and emotional development need to be the core aspects to be understood for both parents, teacher and school leader

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