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Teachers' Strategies in Supporting School Readiness and Transition to Primary School after Pandemic Era

Nurbiana Dhieni¹

Lara Fridani²

Sri Wulan³

Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia^{1,2,3}

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ABSTRACT: According to some early childhood education experts, a child is ready for school if they have the specific information and abilities they need to do so. They define readiness in this sense as a state that must be achieved before studying at school. Previous research has linked sustained academic performance across life to preparation for school. In this study, the researchers examined the strategies used by kindergarten teachers to support children's school readiness and transition to elementary school after the pandemic. Specifically, this research aims to find out the learning strategies implemented by kindergarten teachers when children return to school. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) for nineteen kindergarten teachers were used by researchers to collect narrative data, which was then studied using thematic analysis. Based on the results of qualitative data, researchers obtained information about various strategies implemented by teachers and the challenges they faced when accompanying children to learn. It is expected that the results of this research will provide enlightenment for early childhood teachers in general about the various strategies that need to be implemented to motivate children to learn so that they are ready for school and have a successful transition to elementary school.

Keywords: early childhood, kindergarten teachers' strategy, school readiness, transition to elementary school

¹ Corresponding Author:
Universitas Negeri Jakarta
Email: ndhieni@unj.ac.id

1 INTRODUCTION

The situation after the pandemic period, provides opportunities for children to be actively involved in various activities at school. Specifically in the first week children entering school, the study time span is shorter. The teachers should implement health protocols which have been previously socialized to parents. Currently, all children who enter kindergarten level B have never studied face-to-face. They have been studying from home for almost two years. Therefore, this condition is their first experience interacting with teachers and peers at school.

Kindergarten teachers emphasized that changes to the learning system that are being carried out again in schools, require planned teacher preparation to face the transitions experienced by children. They also must make sure that when children entering school, they must be in good health, wear masks, and be regularly guided to wash their hands before and after activities. The activities for children's school readiness and transition to elementary school are also carried out in stages. Teachers provide a variety of activities that can motivate children to learn about new things and facilitate children's learning through play. Further, teachers are required to think of effective strategies in providing optimal stimulation for children at school. Most of them have gained some basic skills in using technological applications to support children's learning, since the pandemic period. Therefore, teachers' skills in utilizing this technology for children's learning should be developed to support children to be ready to school and make a smooth transition to elementary school level. Teachers must also consider the child's interests, needs, age, and development, to minimize children's problems in learning. In other words, teachers' limitations in accessing the internet, choosing appropriate media, determining appropriate learning strategies, and facilitating learning activities through play, can hinder children's learning process from being ready for school and making the transition to the next level of school.

Previous research from various countries have proven the role of teachers in facilitating children's learning at school (Ma, et al., 2014; Venter et al., 2014). Several studies relate to children's learning that use technological facilities frequently, can cause physical health problems, social interaction problems, and negative impact on various aspects of child's development (Jiang & Monk, 2015; Radesky et al., 2016). A study by Lau and Kerry (2020) proves that there is a risk of children's development problems due to the intensity of virtual learning where children are exposed in front of a computer screen. Zalaznick (2019) also emphasizes that the online learning model cannot prepare young children to have sufficient school readiness from a social and emotional perspective.

In situations where children learn face-to-face at school, children have many experiences that can support their school readiness and transition to elementary school. Berube et al (2018) explain the various challenges faced by children when transitioning to elementary school in normal situations. Moreover, after the pandemic period, teachers must prepare certain strategies to create the learning environment more interesting and challenging for children. They also need to apply rules to children in using technological

media and supervise the various media accessed by children. Thus, the knowledge and skills of teachers are needed so that children can utilize technology according to their needs. Based on the changes in the learning system, researchers are interested in studying teachers' strategies in facilitating children's readiness to school and make the smooth transition to elementary school. In this study, the researchers aimed to look at the methods kindergarten instructors used to help children prepare for school and move to elementary school after the epidemic occurred.

2 THEORETICAL STUDY

Some policymakers view school readiness as children's readiness for school in which they hold specific knowledge and skills to learn at school. In this context, they refer readiness to as what needs to be achieved before school learning. Previous studies have linked school readiness with ongoing academic life success (Beaton & McDonell, 2013; McCain, et al., 2011). Later studies have been conducted in various countries regarding school readiness and the transition of children to continue their studies to elementary school level.

Experts emphasize the importance of school readiness as the basis for a child's educational success. Experts also provide various definitions of school readiness which refer to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory which views children's readiness as part of a big picture that includes children, families, schools, and communities (Correia et.al, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2016; Munnik & Smith, 2019). Children's school readiness cannot be separated from children's knowledge of literacy. Early childhood educators abroad emphasize the importance of literacy skills for kindergarten-aged children who will enter elementary school. Several studies show a relationship between early literacy and children's academic achievement later in life (Zubrick et al., 2015).

The concept of school readiness is being debated by experts internationally, and until now there is no definite consensus regarding its definition (Scott-Little et al., 2006). Referring to the background related to the concept of school readiness, there are various time zones that describe the concept of readiness from various sides (UNICEF, 2012). Cushon et al.,(2011) explained five areas of school readiness which include physical well-being and motor development, emotional health and a positive approach to new experiences, age-appropriate social knowledge and competencies, age-appropriate language skills and general knowledge and skills. cognitive abilities appropriate to the child's age. Reynolds (2019) described school reform strategy that integrates services and supports transitions as well as program which is effective to enhance the transition to school and promoting longer-term well-being. Those more recent studies have a similarly to what earlier experts discussed about school readiness related to children's qualities. It is noted that the most importance child qualities include good physical and mental health, effective communication skills and approach to learning that characterized as enthusiastic and curiosity. In other words, it is not only about academic readiness such

as recognizing alphabet, counting and knowing basic concepts (Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Johnson et al., 1995).

School readiness and the transition to elementary school mostly refer to theories from Western countries which have educational systems and learning resources that are different from developing countries in general. Literature on school readiness and transition that refers to the context of countries in Asia is still relatively limited in number. In the Indonesian context, Fridani (2014) explains that there are differences in the educational climate and differences in transition experiences to elementary school for children who attend school in the Indonesian capital, namely DKI Jakarta. These children must face significant differences in the learning methods and approaches used by teachers when they are in kindergarten and elementary school as well as in terms of curriculum. Thus, children who are not sufficiently prepared to face the transition to elementary school will experience possible risks in adapting to the learning climate in elementary school.

3 METHOD

This study was conducted in DKI Jakarta area and its surroundings, where the government has implemented a policy for teachers to carry out face-to-face learning, after pandemic. Thus, the child returns to study at school, starting with a shorter time, and gradually moving to the normal time span as usual. This study applies the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method in examining the strategies employed by nineteen kindergarten teachers in supporting children's school readiness and transition to Elementary School, after pandemic period. The children are in group B class who will enter elementary school in the next year. Like other regions in Indonesia, educational institutions in DKI Jakarta also implement a face-to-face learning policy for early childhood level including kindergarten level, which is carried out in stages.

The researcher's analysis through the stories that teachers shared and re-storied their experiences to find common themes. Creswell (2013) discusses the importance of narrative study as being co-created by the researcher and some group participants upon sharing their stories. This method was chosen because it has proven effective in assessing how participants give meaning to their perspectives and practices, as well as providing information and insight obtained from focus group dynamics (Patton, 2002). The FGD can also facilitate a forum for kindergarten teachers to share their experiences and challenges in facilitating school readiness and children's transition to primary school. This design can also provide enlightenment for researchers and increase their experience (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). Furthermore, with the implementation of FGD in the context of this research, it is natural that the teachers involved are mostly female which in general can make it easier to express their opinions in situations of togetherness and comfort.

There are four research questions in this study as follows, (1) What preparations do teachers make to facilitate children returning to school and learning face-to-face?; (2) What support does the teacher provide during the child's transition process back to school?; (3) What strategies do teachers use to support children's school readiness and transition to elementary school?; (4) What challenges do teachers face and what ways are taken to overcome possible problems that occur during the transition period?.

4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

The narratives of the kindergarten teachers were analyzed thematically and three themes were obtained related to the dynamics of the teacher's experience as follows: (1) the preparation made by the teacher in facilitating children to learn face-to-face at school after the pandemic period; (2) the learning strategies carried out by the teacher to support the readiness of school children and the transition to elementary school; (3) Challenges faced by teachers to involve children actively in learning and how they deal with learning problems in children.

4.2 Teacher Preparation to Facilitate Children's Learning After the Pandemic Period

When face-to-face learning resumes, the teacher carries out lesson planning as usual, but it is added with preparations to implement health protocols for children. The teachers explained that before children entered school, they had conducted outreach to parents to tell their children the importance of wearing masks, keeping their distance when interacting with friends during this time. Apart from that, hand hygiene must also be maintained so that children do not easily contract diseases. The following information are given by teachers about the preparations they make in welcoming children to learn face-to-face at school.

we have lots of things to prepare, such as implementing health protocol, making sure that children use face masker, providing sanitizer etc. ... it seems simple, but we need extra time and energy to manage this(FGD-1)

well, we did online learning for children until July 2022, then we conduct learning face to face 5 days a week... at this transition time , school starts at 8.30 am to 10.30 am... before it was 8 am _12 pm.... we must teach 10 children in our class...we must consider this situation and prepare everything ...(FGD-1)

before school start, we also discuss about welcoming children to school...to make them feel happy at school. We realize that it is not easy for them to separate with parents, after about one and a half year studying at homewe have 3 classes at our school, each class consist of 22 children (the number of boys and girls almost equal) (FGD-2)

it is also important for us to manage the time allocated for children to do some activities, indoor and outdoorto prepare the material, toys, games, etc...we have 25 children in one class, facilitated by 2 teachers (FGD-3)

4.3 Teachers' Learning Strategies to Support Children's Readiness to School and Transition

Regarding learning strategies, teachers explained that they apply various learning methods in general, but they vary them with the occasional use of technology. The following are several statements from kindergarten teachers in the FGD.

as teachers, we felt a bit confuse at the beginning, because we must observe children's condition whether they feel comfortable at school after the pandemic....we must think the strategies that can motivate children to enjoy, to be active and be involved in learningwe also play traditional games, doing sport , singing together, storytelling (FGD-1)

In our school we don't have specific or new strategy... we just continue implementing center approach.... few times (once in 2 months) children watch video that relates on theme.....we evaluate our learning plan (RPPH), media for learning, arranging the class so children feel comfortable (FGD-2)

after pandemic, sometimes we watch video through YouTube, using in focus (LCD) we teach children some skills according Curriculum Merdeka since the pandemic period, we learn many things, we create interesting media , we play traditional games, we introduce children traditional song and dance (FGD_2)

after pandemic, we use more variety methods... we provide more toys, more equipment to play, we try to be more creative (FGD-3)

4.4 Teachers' Challenges to Involve Children's to Be Active in Learning

Most teachers in this study do not experience significant challenges to involve children actively in learning. However, they stressed that there were some children who needed adjustments in learning to socialize, because during the pandemic period they did not get enough opportunity to interact with their peers. A small number of children also need support to be able to express their emotions naturally, for example when a child is still having difficulty making friends, feeling anxious at school because they must separate from their parents and so on. The following are teachers' statements about their observation regarding children's feeling and involvement when studying at school.

we see that our children feel happy to go to school. Some parents said that when studying from home, children are lazy... sometimes this makes parents get angry... we feel grateful that children do not find it hard to learn at school (FGD-1)

we notice that many children feel excited to return to school, they start to adapt with their friends, play and learn together... we try hard to support them to adapt well with learning (FGD-2)

most of the children look happy to go back to school, they seem enjoy playing together, learning together in a small group, watching video together...when are very happy to see children feel happy (FGD-3)

The kindergarten teachers' support and their positive emotions towards the children are factors that contribute to children's learning and preparation to enter primary school. Teachers' reflection about their teaching experience emphasizes the importance of children's well-being, not only children's academic progress such as reading and writing.

It was found that there are some strategies conducted by kindergarten teachers such as discussing the learning objectives, planning the activity, designing various activities to motivate children's learning, and supporting their school readiness and transition to elementary school. The finding suggests teachers' perspectives and strategies that contribute to children's positive development in various aspects, well-being, and skills. The findings also show the need for teachers to increase their knowledge about children's development, as well as to practice the use of technology in assisting children's learning.

4.5 Discussion

Findings show the lesson planning is done by the teacher as normal when in-person instruction starts up again, but it also includes getting ready to start implementing health procedures for the kids. The teachers clarified that they had done outreach to parents before the kids started school to advise them on the value of masks and to keep their distance from pals during this period. In addition, it is important to maintain hand cleanliness to prevent infections from easily infecting youngsters.

When parents and teachers talk about how their early learning environments change into primary schools, they frequently bring up the topic of school preparation. Regretfully, there's no agreed-upon concept of what school preparedness is. School readiness was described as the abilities, information, and mindset required for success in education as well as in subsequent learning and life, in line with Head Start's definition. In addition to cognitive and academic performance, social-emotional abilities and physical health are also prioritized in the context of school preparation (Halle et al., 2012). The five areas of school preparation are perceptual, motor, and physical development, language and literacy, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and cognition. Children in early learning programs acquire competencies in these five diverse domains, skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be prepared for school.

Over the past thirty years, school preparation has become a popular topic of conversation. According to research, a student's degree of school preparation in kindergarten can predict their performance in the final years, or middle school (Jensen et al., 2021; Slutzky & DeBruin-Parecki, 2019). Many kindergarten instructors have the view that preparedness increases with age. According to a study, kindergarteners who are starting school for the first time exhibit several challenges (Williams et al., 2019). According to Williams et al. (2019), only two-thirds could recognize the letters; 29% could also recognize the first sounds; 94% could recognize numbers and single shapes and count to ten; and 58% could recognize sequence patterns and compare things using non-standard units of length.

The result of the interview, teachers clarified that while they generally employ a variety of learning techniques, they occasionally include technology in their lessons to add some variation. Although there is a growing national need for school preparation, the methods, and standards for preparing kids for school are evolving. There seems to be ongoing evolution in the notion of school readiness when examining research publications

published over several decades. At first, educators prioritized cognitive skills, such as kids' grasp of fundamental ideas and their ability to recognize colors, shapes, and numbers, as the most crucial component of being prepared for school (Hustedt et al., 2017). After that, there was a change in topic and a conversation on how kids' social and emotional development is now a crucial part of being prepared for school (Hustedt et al., 2017). According to facts from the field, emotional control and communication abilities are more crucial for describing school preparedness than intellectual abilities (Hustedt et al., 2017).

Most teachers in this research report that they have no trouble getting kids involved in their education. They did emphasize, though, that some kids required extra help learning how to socialize because they didn't have enough opportunities to engage with their classmates during the epidemic. Some kids also require assistance to be able to naturally communicate their feelings, these kids may be experiencing anxiety at school due to having to be apart from their parents, or they could be having trouble establishing friends, among other things.

Though academics continue to be the focus of kindergarten readiness exams, most teachers indicated that the academic domain was the least relevant in terms of school preparedness (Jensen et al., 2021). Despite these notions, kindergarten has become a more rigorous place due to the pressures placed on students and instructors over their academic performance (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). It should be highlighted that while a lot of studies have been done on the value of school preparedness and the variables that affect it, not as much appears to have been done on the real indicators of playgroup and kindergarten school preparation before the epidemic.

5 CONCLUSION

It was found in this study that kindergarten teachers used several tactics, including discussing learning goals, organizing activities, and creating a variety of activities to inspire children's learning and help them prepare for school and make the transition to elementary school. This research provides recommendations regarding instructor perspectives and methods that support children's healthy growth in a variety of areas, including skills and well-being. The results of this research also show the need for educators to better understand how children develop and practice using technology to support children's learning.

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