A critical incidents analysis – Children's school readiness

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Abstract

Children's school readiness implies their ability to adjust to the requirements imposed by school, to meet the teachers' criteria, to show progress in learning and to their abilities in general. The purpose of this research is to identify the critical incidents relating to children's school readiness. In the context of children's entry into obligatory primary education, there are numerous issues of key importance for a harmonious transition from the kindergarten environment to primary school. The data were collected during group discussions between kindergarten teachers (*n* = 12) and primary education teachers (*n* = 12), who were divided into four focus groups. The qualitative content analysis was performed, and the critical incidents were classified into four categories. Furthermore, focus groups were used as a method of designing questionnaires to examine the expectations of parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers regarding children's readiness for primary school.

Keywords: critical incidents, focus groups, qualitative research, school readiness, teachers;

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1. Introduction

When children start going to school, it is an event of great importance both for the children themselves and for their families. It marks a great change in children's lives, because they find themselves in a new environment, meet new people and face new obligations. From the world of play and individual approach that they got used to in the kindergarten, children experience transition into uniform, systematic studying. Kindergarten teachers monitor children's growth and development and, based on what they have noticed, they apply individual approach to each child. Once children enter primary education, their growth and development are still monitored, but there is also an evaluation and assessment process, which can lead to disappointment should a child fail.

On the first day of school, children feel not only a mixture of happiness and excitement, but also caution and expectations, as well as their parents. There are so many new and unknown things which worry them. Parents worry about how children will manage at school, what kind of relationship they will develop with their teachers and classmates, how they would participate in the learning process and what kind of progress they would make in the learning process. How a child has been prepared for school can have a great impact on the way a child accepts school. This preparation starts in an early childhood in the family context, in the kindergarten and a broader environment.

According to the Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (The Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, 2015), organized care for children starts at the age of 6 months old and lasts until they start primary education. Curriculum design and its implementation are based on the principles of the flexibility of the educational process; on the partnership between the kindergarten as an institution, parents and the community; on the continuity of the educational process and on the openness towards continuous learning and readiness for professional advancement. Children who attend kindergarten undergo the process of preparation for school in the kindergarten itself, while those who are not enrolled in the regular kindergarten programme have to attend school preparation programme. In this way, in the year before the start of primary education, kindergarten education is compulsory for all children in the Republic of Croatia (The Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, 2015; Ordinance on the Content and Duration of Preschool Programme, 2014). Kindergarten curriculum is implemented from October 1 to May 31, with the total of 250 hours per year. Its primary aim is to develop and improve physical, emotional, social and cognitive abilities of a child, as well as to encourage the development of communication skills crucial for the new forms of learning.

1.1. Literature Review

After kindergarten education, a child is expected to be mature and ready for school. Čudina-Obradović (2008) differentiates between the terms maturity and readiness, pointing out that maturity is associated with biological development of children, while readiness implies compliance with the requirements imposed by school, meeting teachers' criteria, progress in the learning process and development of abilities. Latham (2018) believes that school readiness encompasses not only academic skills (such as reading and mathematical knowledge), but also social and emotional skills and physical health. Chronological age is an indicator of school maturity, which means that pursuant to The Primary and Secondary School Education Act, in the Republic of Croatia it is obligatory for all children who turn 6 years old by April 1 of the current year to enrol in primary school (The Primary

and Secondary School Education Act, 2008). In most European countries, the minimum age of pupils for primary school enrolment is six years old (Lumaurridlo et al., 2021).

The capacities children have at the start of formal schooling are important for their future success, and can help predict subsequent academic achievement (Christensen et al., 2020, p. 126). If a child can meet the criteria set by school and teachers, or his/her stage of development enables the child to participate successfully in the educational process, we can speak about school readiness (Lemelin et al., 2008), which is estimated by the tests carried out by school. The results of these aptitude tests indicate not only school readiness, but also perceptive, sensory and motor maturity. If a child should fail to exhibit a sufficient level of school readiness, that is, if the test results are poor, the child is not considered ready for school. In neurological sense, it would mean that a child's "brain" has not developed sufficiently and their entry in primary education is postponed (Čudina-Obradović, 2008). In such situations parents are advised to work with their children on activities which will help children make progress and be ready for school next year. It is very important to identify specific difficulties a child has before they start going to school and to take timely action in order to minimize or remove their impact (Oštarčević, 2008). In order for a child to adapt easily to school requirements, it is important that a child be sufficiently motivated (Kadum et al., 2021). Some experts question the common, widely accepted approach to school readiness, so Moss (2019, p. 95) mentions 'technology of normalisation'. The term implies measures in national policies used to assess whether a child is ready for school, according to the previously set norm.

If interaction between a child and family is supportive, and interaction between the family and kindergarten is also satisfactory, it is almost certain that a child will have enough self-confidence and motivation to enter primary education and that such interaction will continue. Parents are the first teachers in their children's lives and they can have an important role in supporting their child's school readiness (Öngören, 2021). In this process, parents' attitudes to school are of great significance, since they influence the way in which children perceive school. If parents have a positive attitude to school, a child will also perceive it in a positive way. This facilitates their adjustment to school and has a good impact on school success and progress (Pyle, 2003). Parents should by no means use school or teachers to intimidate a child, or project their own negative school experiences (Plachcka, 2012).

In order to ease the transition process as much as possible, to develop a collaborative partnership between the kindergarten and school, and to ensure a continuity in the learning process, preschool and primary school teachers have an important role in providing support to children and their families (Rouse et al., 2020). Their expectations about school readiness are frequently quite different. While kindergarten teachers believe that children are sufficiently prepared for school, primary education teachers are often dissatisfied with such preparation. Their perceptions of readiness are quite diverse.

Families, kindergartens and schools can apply a playful approach to learning in order to support the development of knowledge, abilities, understanding, attitudes and values which children need to possess to be able to function successfully in the school environment (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2018). At preschool age, play is the primary activity through which children learn. While playing, they acquire knowledge, skills, the rules of polite behaviour, they learn to be patient, to wait, share, respect others and to create a positive self-image. However, in primary school, their time for play is limited,

the curriculum is different, there are new rules which they need to obey and relationships with classmates and adults in school are different (Wong & Power, 2019).

Children are expected to be independent, serious, and ready for work and to have good prior knowledge in order to achieve the learning goals. If their behaviour is not in line with the expectations, teachers and parents become dissatisfied. Parents hold kindergartens responsible for insufficient preparation of their children to meet school requirements. Some research has shown that teachers base their estimate of school readiness on a child's ability to read and write, and on their recognition of basic mathematical concepts (Čudina-Obradović, 2008). Somolanji Tokić (2016) stated that schools expect children to have a set of complete abilities. Once children start primary school, they actively upgrade their knowledge and skills, develop competencies, continue their personal growth and development and are able to cope in everyday life situations (The Croatian National Curriculum Framework for Primary Education, 2017). Primary education is based on the national curriculum, syllabus and school curriculum. Students come from diverse social backgrounds, with different expectations, interests, needs, experiences and knowledge. The teaching content is unique; that is, it is the same for everyone, regardless of their abilities, although schools should adjust to a certain extent and implement a more individualized approach in certain cases (Somolanji Tokić & Kretić Majer, 2015).

In order to facilitate children's adjustment to school, it is necessary to ensure a quality cooperation between kindergartens and schools, constructive communication between kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, implementation of joint activities, visits and to organize socializing of preschoolers and primary school students (Visković & Višnjić-Jevtić, 2020). A greater flexibility of kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, as well as understanding of the children's developmental needs might contribute to a greater satisfaction of all stakeholders who are actively involved in children's school readiness.

The research aim was to identify critical incidents associated with children's school readiness from the perspectives of kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers.

The following are considered the research questions:

Which knowledge, abilities, skills and behaviour are necessary for children to make them ready for school?

Whose responsibility is children's school readiness?

What should be done in order to ensure a smooth and appropriate transition from kindergarten to school?

2. Method

2.1. General Background

Critical Incident Technique was introduced into social studies by Flanagan, almost 70 years ago (1954; according to Gremler, 2004), implying a set of procedures to collect, perform content analysis of, and classify observations of human behaviour. The technique is applicable in numerous scientific disciplines, enabling the researchers to analyse specific incidents or occurrences and to estimate their significance with qualitative interviews (Alanazi, 2018). Joshi (2018) states that we interpret a

critical incident as a problem or a challenge in a certain context. Tripp (1993; according to Mohammed, 2016) developed the critical incident analysis as a pedagogical theory whose approach and application provide an opportunity for reflection on the teaching process with the aim of improving professional judgments and activity of teachers. Farell (2008) pointed out that analysing critical incidents is a well-established activity in general education programmes. Identification of critical incidents can be taken as a starting point for further development through learning experience (Serrat, 2017).

A critical incident is an event of a special importance for a person, a group of people or an institution. In the context of children who are about to start the obligatory primary education, there is a wide range of moments which might be of key significance for a harmonious transition from kindergarten to primary school, or those that could impede or even hinder it. It is a turning point in children's lives, but kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers view this event from different perspectives. This qualitative research technique was applied in the study because it enabled a deeper understanding of personal experiences of the respondents.

2.2. Participants

In the pedagogical discourse, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers can reflect on their work by exploring and articulating critical incidents (Farrell, 2013). In line with that, two focus groups (F1 and F2) of kindergarten teachers (*n* = 12) were formed, as well as two focus groups (F3 and F4) of primary education teachers (*n* = 12). The focus groups were formed in a way which meets the principle of homogeneity. Group discussions were held in October 2021, in the cities of Varaždin and Sisak (Croatia). The discussions were organized in the evening, lasting between 55 and 80 minutes. All discussions were recorded, and the participants were informed in advance about the purpose and the methods of the research. They were granted anonymity and the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any moment. All participants were females with an extensive work experience in kindergartens and schools (minimum of 9 years of work experience), and as such, they provided a valuable source of data.

2.3. Procedures

The critical incidents in this research encompassed all the moments highlighted by kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, and they incorporate children's knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviour, and are associated with the entry into primary school. In order to test the classification scheme, we applied a holdout sample recommended by Stauss (1993). The incidents highlighted by teachers from focus groups F1 and F3 were used to create the categories, while the remaining incidents, highlighted by focus groups F2 and F4, were used to examine whether they could fit into the categories.

In order to determine the inter-rater reliability, or a level of agreement between various raters, two independent coders classified the incidents into the categories. High inter-rater reliability values indicate a greater level of agreement between the raters (Lange, 2011). Inter-rater reliability in our study was .91, while a satisfactory value is any value above .80 (McIntosh & Kelm, 2016).

2.4. Data Analysis

For data analysis, we used qualitative content analysis and interpretative approach. In most cases, the respondents themselves offered explanations and interpretations, placing into context the events they considered as critical incidents. Francis points out that critical incident analysis raises the complexity of the lived experience to a conscious level (Francis, 1997, p. 182).

3. Findings and Discussion

Kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers highlighted 69 critical incidents associated with a child's school readiness. Qualitative content analysis was applied to classify the critical incidents into four categories: Children's behaviour, Existential content, Cooperation between parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, and Communication (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of critical incidents

Topic	Number of incidents
Children's behaviour	6
Existential content	28
Cooperation between parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers	21
Communication	14
Total incidents	**69**

According to the research results, kindergarten teachers listed a smaller number of critical incidents than primary education teachers. Their descriptions of these incidents were narrative. The categories containing the largest number of incidents were Existential content and Cooperation between parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, while the category Children's behaviour contained the lowest number of incidents.

It should be pointed out that there were differences in opinions regarding some incidents not only between kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, but also among primary education teachers themselves. For example, in the category Communication, a primary education teacher thinks that children should be able to respond to questions using full sentences when they start going to primary school, while another primary education teacher is of the opinion that a child is too young to respond to questions using full sentences at 6 years old.

3.1. Children's Behaviour

Behaviour can be defined as a subjective reaction of a human body to objective stimuli and circumstances (Bezić, 2005), and this reaction includes various actions, procedures, movements, and activities. Petz (2005) gives a similar description of behaviour, stating that these are all forms of verbal, motor and physiological responses of the body to direct or indirect stimuli.

Small children cannot differentiate between the patterns of behaviour which are acceptable and those which are not. Children learn by observing others. They learn the basic rules and patterns of socially acceptable behaviour primarily from their parents. In the family setting, children make their first steps, speak their first words, develop various skills, acquire numerous competencies, acquire moral and social values and learn about empathy, tolerance, communication and self-regulation

(Đuranović & Klasnić, 2020). Berk (2008) pointed out that there is no other context of development that can be compared to the family environment, in terms of power and scope.

Kindergarten teachers believe that some children have not acquired the basic rules of polite communication.

Some children come to the kindergarten and do not greet the teachers. It is not surprising, because their parents fail to set a good example – they leave the kindergarten in a hurry, without saying goodbye to their child.

Many respondents mentioned obeying the rules in their group discussions.

I have noticed that it is difficult for some students to obey the rules of the game, so I talked to them about it during the class. A student explained that he normally plays board games with his grandmother. When he loses, the rules change in order to enable him to win. (a primary education teacher)

3.2. Existential Content

Starting from the basic human needs and the social values system, it is customary to divide the content of contemporary education into 6 basic categories: existential, social, humanistic, scientific, artistic and technological (Bognar, 1999; Bognar & Matijević, 2005; Miljković et al., 2019). The existential content of education implies the content which enables a person to maintain, protect and sustain life (e.g. education for sustainable development, Physical Education, traffic education, practical organization of everyday activities, etc.).

The importance of acquiring the (basics of) existential content (even from an early age) was also emphasized by the teachers.

Last year, we had a boy who enrolled into kindergarten at the age of 5. He was really dependent on others – he could not use the toilet on his own, he could not put on his clothes or shoes, he could not eat on his own… we had to teach him these skills from scratch, while other children learn these skills in their nursery days. (a kindergarten teacher)

A primary education teacher agreed with this kindergarten teacher, and added that children are quite dependent when they start going to primary school.

2 or 3 years ago, we had a generation in which there was only one student, out of about 60 students in 3 classes, who was able to put on his clothes and shoes on his own, without any assistance.

Another primary education teacher added:

Children are different, depending on their parents and kindergarten teachers. There is a growing number of children who are not ready and who are not independent when they start primary school. They are used to having all these things done by their parents. They are not independent when putting on their clothes and shoes. They are unable to use the cutlery on their own, because probably their parents feed them at home. That is why they prefer not to eat during lunch break at school.

Within the framework of existential content, the respondents pointed out the importance of motor skills development. One of them stated that children start primary school with insufficiently developed motor skills.

The modern children are afraid of the ball; they are not dexterous at catching and passing the ball, climbing the Swedish ladder or running. This is even more pronounced in children who live in urban, than those who live in rural areas.

Another primary education teacher believes that overprotective parents should be blamed for this level of children's dependence.

The parents do not let children to move freely, to jump, run or climb the trees. The consequence of this is the fact that children are clumsy.

Kindergarten teachers agree that parents are overprotective and that they hinder children's motor development. One of them added:

Nowadays, children have a minimum of physical activity. Wherever they need to go, the parents drive them. These days it has become a rare sight to see a parent walking with the child to or from the kindergarten. Sometimes they are likely to drive them to the very entrance of the kindergarten.

3.3. Cooperation between Parents, Kindergarten Teachers and Primary Education Teachers

In order to prepare children successfully for primary school, quality cooperation between parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers is of great importance. This cooperation can be best described as a process of mutual information exchange, counselling, learning and discussions with the aim of sharing responsibility for children's development in the family and kindergarten and/or school. The final goal of this kind of cooperation is always the well-being of children (Maleš, 1996). Successful cooperation requires from all stakeholders a great amount of trust, openness and tolerance, but mostly objectivity and readiness for information exchange (Milanović, 2014).

Kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers are aware of the importance of their cooperation with parents (as well as of their mutual cooperation) in the process of preparation of children for school, but they point out that cooperation with some parents can be extremely difficult.

It would be good if parents listened to the suggestions of kindergarten teachers and worked with their children at home in a way similar to kindergarten. In this way, children's development would be improved and they would face fewer problems in completing the tasks that are important for good preparation for school. (a kindergarten teacher)

Another kindergarten teacher added:

The problem is the fact that parents become interested in preparation for school only in the year before their children start going to primary school. Most frequently, they do not understand that this preparation starts as early as nursery.

Primary education teachers also expressed their opinion relating to the importance of cooperation between parents and teachers.

Cooperation with parents is of utmost importance; parents should know how a child functions in school (sometimes their behaviour in school differs from their behaviour at home). I believe that

modern parents are too focused on grades and are not aware that it is more important to study for knowledge than for grades. When cooperation with parents is good and of high quality, the child's progress is better.

Kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers agree that cooperation between kindergartens and schools should be strengthened.

I think that kindergartens and schools should be connected in a better way. Kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers should meet more often in order to exchange experiences, expectations and to learn more about the teaching methods they are applying in their contexts. (a kindergarten teacher)

It is necessary to organize more visits to school for children who are about to start primary school. Kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers could also observe each other's classes and exchange key information about children who are entering primary schools because it would facilitate the work of primary education teachers to a great extent. (a primary education teacher)

I believe that kindergartens and schools should cooperate much better. I suggest organizing a round table for kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, an open exchange of experiences and agreement on what should be developed in children. This would make us partners. (a primary education teacher)

I think that cooperation between kindergartens and schools should be made obligatory at the state level. Kindergartens should also be given guidelines regarding the necessary skills a child should master before they start going to school. This would make their first days in school more enjoyable. (a primary education teacher)

Both kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers agree that children should be relieved of fear of school. All of them point out the necessity of organizing frequent visits of preschoolers to schools (for example, before they officially start going to primary school, children should join school classes several times in order to become familiar with school life). It is also suggested that teachers who are about to teach first graders visit them in kindergartens before meeting them in the school environment.

3.4. Communication

Communication is an important foundation for all interpersonal relationships. A good communication skill is developed throughout the entire life and is primarily learnt in the family context. Ferić and Žižak (2004) pointed out that communication is one of the most important experiences that adults can offer to children.

Both kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers agree that most parents do not communicate enough with children and it is the reason that children have rather poor vocabulary and insufficiently developed communication skills.

One of the kindergarten teachers believed that parents should take any opportunity for conversation with their children.

For example, parents can talk to children on the way to kindergarten/school, describe the route to them, talk about things they can see in front of and behind them, discuss the dangers imposed by

traffic, etc. Unfortunately, few parents walk and talk with their children, because most of them take the car and are always in a hurry. (a kindergarten teacher)

A primary education teacher believes that parents are not sufficiently involved in the lives of their children.

Parents should become more involved in their children's lives, dedicate themselves to children and spend quality time with them. It is important that parents talk to children about their emotions, to listen to children's daily accounts of the events in kindergarten/school and to discuss everyday life situations with them. Unfortunately, parents talk to children mostly about grades and results. These are so pointless conversations.

As far as children's school readiness is concerned, primary education teachers have different opinions.

When they start going to primary school, children should be able to reply to questions using full sentences. (a primary education teacher)

Another primary education teacher has a different opinion:

I disagree. I believe that age 6 is too early to expect a child to reply to questions using full sentences.

The critical incident analysis is a valuable tool, applicable in the educational context. Mohammed points out that (Mohammed, 2016, p. 29) critical incident analysis has been useful in navigating through the challenges that educators encounter in the teaching context. It also enables an insight into experiences in the field of education, which can create opportunities for reflecting on and planning a more efficient and successful pedagogical procedures (Neergaard & Leitch, 2015). Apart from identifying critical incidents, a critical incident analysis goes a step further, investigating a deeper meaning and seeking the fundamental problem, in an attempt to encourage teachers to explore the possibilities for future professional practice (Mohammed, 2016).

It is interesting to note that the critical incidents highlighted by both kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers in the study, were mostly focused on the negative aspects and shortcomings, and to a lesser extent to the positive moments. Francis (1995) and Farrell (2008) collected similar data. Trainee teachers were focused more on negative critical incidents and were more likely to recall them than the positive ones.

Focus groups are an ideal solution for preparing quantitative research, or defining the questionnaire content (Skoko & Benković, 2009). The categories created in this research will constitute composite variables for sets of items on the Likert-type scale, which respondents will use to estimate their level of agreement with a certain item. Using focus groups prior to questionnaire is a sensible methodological strategy which can encompass numerous gradients of opinion, include new questions which cover the unpredicted dimensions of the studied phenomenon, and eventually prevent the risks or problems that might compromise the quality of the research (de Sousa et al., 2021).

4. Conclusion and implications

he primary aim of the study was to identify critical incidents relating to children's school readiness. Kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers have pointed out numerous significant moments of key importance for harmonious transition of children from kindergarten to school environment. By applying the qualitative content analysis, the critical incidents were classified into four categories: Children's behaviour, Existential content, Cooperation between parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers, and Communication. Numerous kinds of knowledge, abilities, skills and patterns of behaviour which children should have in order to be ready for school were highlighted, according to the opinions of kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers. All respondents pointed out the need for joint responsibility (of parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers) for the process of preparing children for smooth transition from kindergarten to school. However, there is still no consensus on how much each of the parties should participate in this process. It seems that the significant emphasis was placed on the insufficient efforts made by parents to prepare their children for school. However, parents were not members of the focus groups, so these issues will have to be examined additionally, from their point of view.

For a great number of critical incidents there are also concrete suggestions on how children's school readiness can be improved. These include the following: organizing round tables in which relevant topics could be discussed; organizing frequent meetings of kindergarten and school children; strengthening cooperation and encouraging exchange of experiences between parents, kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers; monitoring children during kindergarten and primary school education using portfolios, and designing national programmes which would provide guidelines for a harmonious transition of children to a new, school environment.

The value of this study relies on the data obtained from the respondents who are actively involved in education of children and their transition to school (depending on whether they are kindergarten teachers or primary education teachers). In the interviews conducted in focus groups, the respondents had an opportunity to use their own words to highlight and describe the incidents they consider relevant for children's school readiness. Focus group members were experts with substantial work experience, which contributed to a higher validity of the study. Numerous critical incidents were identified in the discussions held with kindergarten and primary education teachers. We believe that this can be attributed to the fact that both groups of teachers are competent experts who consider the particular research subject a professional challenge.

In this study, the qualitative approach on a smaller sample was applied. In order to make generalizations, a larger sample will be needed, as well as the mixed method approach. We are aware that these incidents were highlighted as critical from the perspective of kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers. Parents, on the other hand, might view them differently. For this reason, and based on the data collected in focus groups, a questionnaire will be created for kindergarten teachers, primary education teachers and parents of children in the final year of kindergarten and parents of the children attending the first grade of primary school.

In any case, we hope that additional attention will be paid to children's school readiness and transition from kindergarten to school. It should also be taken into consideration that kindergarten teachers and primary education teachers have different perspectives on some incidents, but also

identical opinions on some other incidents. It is important to adjust the attitudes, with the aim of ensuring the well-being of children.

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