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Examining the Expectations of Early Years Teachers in the UAE Regarding a Successful Start to  
School for Children With and Without Special Educational Needs

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Starting school has been shown to correlate with later school outcomes, both academic and social. The success of the transition of Special Educational Needs (SEN) depends on the child's adaptation to the new environment and on the teachers and school supports to facilitate the children's learning. However, previous research indicated that expectations of teachers toward students with SEN has been low. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine Cycle 1 teachers' expectations with respect to the transition experience of children with Downs Syndrome and those without SEN in the UAE. Teachers working in the UAE in Early Years' education completed a questionnaire twice, once thinking about their expectations of a child without any SEN and once thinking about a child with Downs Syndrome. Findings demonstrated a different pattern of expectations depending on whether the child had Downs Syndrome or no SEN, indicating, in general, a lower set of academic expectations for children with Downs Syndrome. Implications for children starting school in the UAE are discussed.

Over the past decades, the entire structure of special education services all over the world has been undergoing significant changes. Similarly, in the UAE the field of special education has experienced dramatic changes especially with regard to the inclusion movement that calls on educating students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the general education classroom (Gaad 2004). The 2006 UAE Federal Law (No.29, Article 12) granted children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) the right to education in the general education classrooms (Federal Law No. 29/2006). In 2008, the Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) and Zayed Higher Organization for Humanitarian Care signed an agreement of integrating children with special needs in the general education classrooms. Consequently, the number of children with SEN enrolling in the UAE government schools has significantly increased lately. With the inclusion movement in the UAE, children with SEN with mild and moderate disabilities are currently placed in inclusive kindergarten classrooms.

The process of entering full time schooling is known in the literature as “transitioning”. As children move through their academic careers, they will experience multiple transitions, each year as they move between classes and, more significant moves between schools (Fthenakis, 1988). Transition into school, for the first time, as a young child has been shown to correlate with later school outcomes, with cross-cultural research demonstrating a relationship between early transition experiences and both social competence and academic achievement, with a positive transition leading to a more successful school career (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar & Plewis, 1988; Ramey & Campbell, 1991). Further, how the child adapts to educational transitions can influence how well they adapt to change generally (Fthenakis, 1988). Research suggests that transitions in the early years are especially influential in determining the course of the school experience (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002).

Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) face a complicated and challenging transition to school (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, Hughes, 2007). The success of the transition of SEN depends on the child's adaptation to the new environment and on the parents, teachers, and school supports to facilitate the children's learning. Alongside the effect of teacher attitudes and expectations of children with or without SEN play a key role in determining the quality of the child's with transition (Salend, 2008). Understanding the factors affecting smooth transition for children with special needs is critical to meet the needs of children who are being served. Teachers' expectation is one of the most important factor of planning for children starting school (Chadwick & Kemp, 2008). Previous researchers indicated that teachers' attitudes toward children with SEN will determine the quality of the child's transition from preschool to the general classrooms (Hains & Fowler & Chandler, 1988).

Despite the revolution in legislative policies of equal educational access and the movement toward including students with SEN in general education classrooms, there is still a need to support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Positive teacher attitudes toward children with SEN play a key role in including these children into a regular education kindergarten classroom (Troup & Malone, 1999). Research indicates that the success of inclusion programs is dependent on teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusion (Dukmak, 2013; Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006; Salend, 2008). Teachers' attitudes toward students with SEN affect the success and effectiveness of inclusion (Cassady, 2011). Indeed, a positive attitude can support a smoother transition to prekindergarten and kindergarten for children with SEN. Studies examining kindergarten transition for children with SEN have highlighted a number of problems that might be experienced by parents including school staff attitudes, communicating with school

staff and their children abilities to cope in the inclusive classrooms ((Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2013).

Children with SEN generally exhibit different behaviors than the other typical students. Therefore, they need individualized attention from teachers. When general education teachers hold low expectations or negative attitudes toward including SEN in their classroom, they are more likely not going to provide the necessary support that would create a positive learning environment for SEN (Cassady, 2011). According to Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000), teachers' attitude is the major barrier to have successful inclusion. Several research studies reported that teachers possess negative attitudes toward students with disabilities. According to Florian (2012), many regular educators in Scotland were not willing to include SEN in their classes. In another study conducted by Zoniou-Sideri and Vleahou (2006) on Greek teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, the results of this study revealed that teachers have negative attitudes toward disability and inclusion. Also, findings of another study conducted in the UAE revealed that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion influenced by the type of the disability. More specifically, Algazo and Gaad (2004) found that teachers were more supportive to inclusion for students with physical disabilities in comparison to students with other disabilities including students with intellectual disability. Earlier Petty and Sadler (1996) found that teacher attitudes toward inclusion and their expectations regarding the social and academic abilities of their pupils with Down syndrome varied according to personal factors (knowledge base & self-efficacy) and external factors (the degree of classroom support).

Previous research reports that children live up to their teachers' expectations ((Boehlert, 2005; Good and Brophy, 1994). So, if teachers hold low expectations toward children with SEN, children with SEN would more likely to achieve poorly. Whereas, when teachers have high

expectations, children with SEN academic performance may be affected positively. Since schools in the UAE are currently adopting the inclusive education approach teachers' positive attitude is critical to have a climate of high expectation that value individual differences (Abbott, 2006). The perceptions of the students regarding teachers' differential treatment of students with and without SEN may affect children's behaviors to fulfill prophecies of teachers. This has been confirmed earlier by Good and Brophy (1994) model, which explains how teacher's expectations for students often can lead, via differential treatments, to the fulfillment of these expectations.

Previous research findings were inconsistent with respect to teachers' perceptions on the specific skills children with and without SEN needed to be successful in kindergarten. For instance, Lin, Lawrence, and Gorrel (2003) reported that teachers view social skills and social competence as the most important factor to successful transition to kindergarten. Whereas, Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) indicated that kindergarten teachers agree that kindergarten is becoming more academic (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). In a study that examined kindergarten teachers' perceptions on the specific skills children with disabilities needed to be successful in kindergarten, self-help skills ranked as the most important skill followed by social skills, attending, reading readiness, following rules, name recognition and printing name, number recognition, and color recognition (Troup & Malone, 1999).

The focus of the effect of transition on the prime stakeholders including children, families and teachers has its origin in the work of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and can be seen in the context of his Ecological Systems Theory. The child is viewed as being embedded within contexts made up of interactions and relationships. Within this perspective, children will be influenced by, and in turn, will influence other people within the particular context. Transition to school is, therefore, best understood as

the meeting of the various contexts of the child e.g. school, home, community, and the relationships between each of the people existing in these contexts. The theory is highly context and time dependent and will be influenced by both internal and external factors impacting on all of the people in any of the contexts. As a result of this theoretical perspective, the focus of transition research has moved away from looking at factors internal to the child, such as, perceived readiness for school (Meisels, 1999) or self-esteem of the child (Harter, 1983), to a much more context based approach, focusing on the key players within the relevant contexts, such as parents or teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2002; 2004; Dockett, Perry, Kearney, et al. 2011; Perry & Dockett, 2011).

Following from this, it can be extrapolated that the transition to school experience will be effected by all who are involved in the process, for example, teachers and the child themselves. The attitudes, expectations, and behaviours of teachers can impact on how successfully a child will transition to school. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999) utilized an ecological model of family, classroom and community in transition to school and stressed the importance of taking the perspectives of each of these groups into account when trying to understand what would make a successful start to school.

It is acknowledged that the ecological approach would suggest that the experience and expectations of each child, family and teacher will be highly individual as each will be operating within its own specific set of context. Dockett & Perry (2004) as part of the Starting School Research Project in Western Australia, focused on the expectations of parents and teachers. Respondents were asked to complete a 20 item questionnaire in response to the question ‘How important are the following for deciding whether a child has had a successful first two terms of school’ There followed 20 items, which were rated on a 4 point Likert scale running from ‘Not



Important' to 'Extremely Important'. Their findings report the responses of 162 teachers and 355 parents who had children who had transitioned into school within that academic year. Dockett & Perry (2004) found that teachers tended to place greater importance of social factors, such as being able to function within the classroom environment.

For SEN, the prekindergarten experience is usually different than for normal children. To survive in an inclusive kindergarten classroom student with SEN needs curriculum adaptations. Previous researchers indicated that teachers don't fully support inclusion because they do not know how to differentiate instruction (Lopes, Monteiro & Sil, 2004).

The vast majority of previous research in the area of transition in early childhood setting has been conducted in America (Rosenkoetter & Rosenkoetter, 1993), United Kingdom (Katz, 2010; Sykes, et al., 2009, Peters & Dunlop, 2014) and Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2004). There is very little research which has been conducted into the expectations of children starting school in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Secondly, there is a paucity of research pertaining to teachers' perspectives around the transition expectations for children with special educational needs' within the UAE. The gap of research indicates a need for further inquiry in this matter. And finally, expectations and attitudes towards children with disabilities can make a transition to prekindergarten and/or kindergarten for children with SEN positive or negative. Results of previous research studies indicated that teachers' perspectives and expectations can dramatically affect their practices. Therefore, examining the perspectives of kindergarten teachers with regard to kindergarten readiness is critical. This study intends to investigate the perspectives of teachers pertaining to the transition experience of children with SEN, specifically Downs Syndrome compared with children without special educational needs, who are starting school in the UAE. More specifically, this study intends to answer the following research questions.

1. What factors do teachers perceive as important to have a successful start to school for children with Downs Syndrome in the UAE?
2. What factors do teachers perceive as important to have a successful start to school for children without SEN in the UAE?
3. Are there any differences between the views of teachers on what factors would make a successful start to school depending on whether a child has Downs Syndrome or no Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the UAE?

## **Methods:**

### **Design**

A repeated measures design was utilised. Participants were asked to complete the same questionnaire twice, once thinking about children with Down's Syndrome and once thinking about children without special educational needs. The order of presentation of conditions was counterbalanced.

### **Participants**

A total of 50 teachers working in early years settings in the UAE were recruited for the study. The sample consisted of teachers who were currently working in the Early Years Foundation Stages (EYFS) in schools or nurseries in the UAE in FS1, FS2 or Year 1. Teachers were recruited via social media and through word of mouth.

Teachers had a mean number of years teaching in early years of 9.28 years (standard deviation 6.07), with a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 22 years.

### **Materials**

This research project received approval from the Social Sciences Ethical Approval Board at the United Arab Emirates University.

Participants were provided with a link to a google form which they completed on line. The form consisted of a 20 item questionnaire. The questionnaire asked them to rate 20 factors in importance to the question “How important are the following for deciding whether a child has had a successful first two terms of school?”. The items were scored on a 4 point Likert scale (Not Important, Somewhat Important, Very Important, Extremely Important). This questionnaire was taken from Dockett and Perry (2010).

Teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire twice, once thinking about a child with Down’s Syndrome and once considering a child without SEN.

Participants were asked to give some demographic details including how many years they have been working in Early Years’ education and which country they are currently living and working in in.

## **Results**

SPSS was used to analyse the data, using paired sampled t-tests with a Bonferroni correction.

***Research Question 1: What factors do teachers perceive as important to have a successful start to school for children with Downs Syndrome?***

The means and standard deviations of the items completed in relation to children with Downs Syndrome are shown in Table 1.

*(Insert Table 1 around here).*

Following the classification used by Dockett & Perry (2004), reliability analysis was conducted on the items and six scales were constructed. These scales were labelled: Knowledge; Adjustment; Family; Expectations; Academic; Disposition. Table 2 shows the Chronbach's alpha and the items which make up each scale. For the Expectations and Academic scale, the alpha value was initially low and so items 8 and 16 on the questionnaire were removed.

*(Insert Table 2 around here).*

The means and standard deviations for each of the scales is shown in Table 3. Bonferroni adjusted paired samples t-tests were conducted to compare the means on each scale.

Significant differences were found between the Knowledge scale and each of the other scales (Knowledge cf. Adjustment  $t=14.11$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Family  $t=10.33$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Disposition  $t=17.48$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Expectations  $t=14.09$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Academic  $t=9.30$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In all cases, the mean for knowledge was lower. This indicates that teachers place less importance on knowledge in determining a successful start to school than the other domains.

*(Insert Table 3 around here).*

Similarly, significant differences were found between the Adjustment scale and the following scales: Family ( $t=7.05$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); Academic ( $t=4.30$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); and Disposition ( $t=3.15$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.005$ ). In all cases, the mean for Adjustment was higher, indicating that teachers place more importance on this than on the Family; Academic and Disposition domains.

Significant differences were obtained between the Family scale and the following: Expectations ( $t=5.07$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); and Disposition ( $t=8.92$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In both cases, the mean for the Family scale was lower, indicating that teachers placed less importance on Family interaction than on the Expectations and Disposition domains.

Significant differences were obtained between the Expectations scale and the following: Academic ( $t=4.02$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); and Disposition ( $t=3.66$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The Expectation scale was rated significantly higher than academic and significantly lower than Disposition.

Finally, the disposition scale was rated significantly higher than the Academic scale ( $t=5.83$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

To summarise, the scales were rated in the following order of importance: Disposition; Adjustment; Expectations; Academic; Family; and Knowledge. Significant differences were obtained between all of these scales, with the exception of between Adjustment and Expectations, and between Family and Knowledge.

***Research Question 2: What factors do teachers perceive as important to have a successful start to school for children without Special Educational Needs (SEN)?***

The means and standard deviations of the items completed in relation to children without SEN are shown in Table 1. The means and standard deviations for each of the scales is shown in Table 3.

Bonferroni adjusted paired samples t-tests were conducted to compare the means on each scale. Significant differences were found between the Knowledge scale and each of the other scales, (Knowledge cf. Adjustment  $t=4.05$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Family  $t=2.52$ ,

df=49,  $p < 0.01$ ; Knowledge cf. Disposition  $t = 6.27$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Expectations  $t = 8.32$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Knowledge cf. Academic  $t = 4.27$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In all cases, the mean for knowledge was lower. This indicates that teachers place less importance on knowledge in determining a successful start to school than the other domains.

Similarly, significant differences were found between the Adjustment scale and the following scales: Family ( $t = 3.52$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); Expectations ( $t = 5.68$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); and Disposition ( $t = 4.64$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The mean for Adjustment was higher than Family and lower than the Expectations and Disposition domains.

Significant differences were obtained between the Family scale and the following: Expectations ( $t = 9.47$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); Academic ( $t = 3.82$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); and Disposition ( $t = 6.91$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In all cases, the mean for the Family scale was lower, indicating that teachers placed less importance on Family interaction than on the Expectations, Academic and Disposition domains.

Significant differences were obtained between the Expectations scale and the Academic scale ( $t = 6.62$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The Expectation scale was rated significantly higher than the Academic scale.

Finally, the disposition scale was rated significantly higher than the Academic scale ( $t = 4.04$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

To summarise, the scales were rated in the following order of importance: Expectations; Disposition; Adjustment; Academic; Family; and Knowledge. Significant differences were obtained between all of these scales, with the exception of between Adjustment and Academic, and between Expectations and Disposition.

***Research Question 3: Are there any differences between the views of teachers on what factors would make a successful start to school depending on whether a child has Downs Syndrome or no Special Educational Needs (SEN)?***

The means and Standard deviations for the six scales split according to whether the child has Downs Syndrome or no SEN are shown in Table 3. The means are also displayed in Figure 1.

*(Insert Figure 1 around here)*

Paired samples t-tests revealed significant differences between the expectations of children with no SEN and those with Downs Syndrome in terms of Knowledge ( $t=8.07$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), the means show that knowledge was less important for children with Downs Syndrome.

There was a significant difference between the two groups on adjustment ( $t=3.64$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that adjustment was considered to be more important for children with Downs Syndrome.

A significant difference was obtained on the Family scale ( $t=3.06$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.005$ ), indicating lower scores on this scale for children with Downs Syndrome.

A significant difference was obtained on the Expectations scale ( $t=4.13$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), with lower scores for children with Downs Syndrome.

Finally, a significant difference was obtained on the Academic scale ( $t=3.22$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $P<0.005$ ), with less importance being placed on this for children with Downs Syndrome.

## **Discussion**

Using the classification developed by Dockett and Perry (2004), the results indicate, firstly, that for children with Down's Syndrome, Early Years teachers in the UAE place less importance on items in the knowledge scale in determining a successful start to school than on the other domains. The domains are ranked for these children from Disposition to Adjustment, followed by Expectations, then Academic, and lastly Family and Knowledge. For children without SEN, the domains are ranked in the following order from highest importance for a successful transition to lowest: Expectations, Disposition, Adjustment, Academic, Family and Knowledge. Therefore, for both groups of children, teachers consider the same three domains (Expectations, Disposition and Adjustment) as the most important factors when starting school, but they are ranked differently for those without Sen and those with Down's Syndrome. Statistical analyses revealed that teachers rate Adjustment as statistically more important in transitioning for children with Down's Syndrome than for those without SEN. The Knowledge, Family, Expectations and Academic scales were all rated as significantly less important for children with Down's Syndrome than for other children. For children without SEN, teachers ranked being able to follow school routines highest, followed by the child separating easily from parents, being eager to go to school, and parents being happy to leave their child at school. These were also rated in the top ten for children with Down's Syndrome. However, academic factors such as the child being able to count to 20, and being pleased with their own academic progress were ranked highly for children without SEN, as well as knowing routines such as where to line up. Perceptions for children with Down's Syndrome focused more on being eager to go to school, separating easily and having friends at school. These results then suggest that there are differences in the



factors which teachers consider important in making a successful start to school depending on whether a child has Down's Syndrome or not.

The findings for teachers in the UAE can be compared with those Dockett and Perry (2004) uncovered in their research with teachers in Western Australia. Their findings indicated that teachers were less concerned about knowledge on school entry, and rated social adjustment, family and disposition items as more important for a successful transition. Interestingly, their top rated items for children without SEN are the same as those for teachers in the UAE for children with Down's Syndrome, though ranked slightly differently. For children without SEN in the UAE, some knowledge items are considered important for a successful transition. This suggests that teachers in the UAE may have higher expectations academically for children in the Early Years than those in Australia, unless those children have an identified SEN. This may also reflect parental views on the importance of academic factors (Dockett and Perry, 2004).

This difference between teacher perceptions in the UAE and Australia for children without SEN may reflect differences in the school curriculum and cultural expectations of early school success. Whilst it may seem positive that teachers have lower knowledge expectations for children with Down's Syndrome, this may be an issue for pupil progress. Evidence suggests that Down's Syndrome is often accompanied by learning disabilities and memory deficits which impact on academic progress (DSE, 2018), but children with Down's Syndrome have widely varying abilities and attainment. Teacher expectations are also known to influence pupil outcomes, for example Campbell (2015), using data from the Millenium Cohort Study in the UK, argues that assessment and attainment inequalities arise in the primary school years from teachers' stereotypes and expectations around gender, ethnicity

and SEN. However, it is also argued that teacher expectations may have a small or limited effect, although this may result in self-fulfilling prophecies for some more marginalised social groups (Jussim & Harber, 2005). In school classes where ability grouping is used, teacher expectations may impact negatively on children's confidence, self-esteem and aspirations (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

Entering full-time education is a potentially stressful time for children and their families. Research highlights the importance for academic and social-emotional outcomes in making the transition as successful as possible. The results from this study indicate that the factors which teachers in the UAE consider important differ for children without SEN and those with Down's Syndrome. This has implications both for the immediate transition to school, and for the future achievements of children. Further research to develop our knowledge in this area is planned with teachers and parents during the transition to school for children with and without SEN. Cross-cultural comparisons will be conducted with findings from the UK.

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