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School readiness: a qualitative analysis of early childhood education and first-grade teachers' beliefs in Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

School Readiness (SR) encompasses the developmental competencies and skills essential to successfully transition to primary school and subsequent academic achievement. Teachers' beliefs about SR in pre-K, kindergarten, and primary school significantly influence educational practices and may impact preschoolers' transition outcomes. Using a qualitative methodology, this study explored these beliefs within the Uruguayan context, analyzing data from 41 pre-K, kindergarten, and first-grade teachers. Findings reveal that most teachers consider socioemotional development, effective learning approaches, well-established routines, and strong communication skills critical for children's academic success. However, differences in SR beliefs emerged based on the school grade taught: pre-K and kindergarten teachers prioritize motor and socioemotional development, whereas first-grade teachers prioritize math, language skills, and autonomy. Furthermore, teachers state they are aware of these discrepancies in beliefs between educational levels. Policy implications of these findings include that addressing disparities in SR beliefs among teachers through targeted interventions could enhance educational practices and support smoother transitions to primary school.

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1. Introduction

Most children transition successfully from early childhood education¹ (ECE) to primary school. However, this transition is frequently experienced as a discontinuity and some children struggle with short-term (e.g. well-being) and long-term (e.g. later achievement) consequences due to their inability to meet environmental expectations (Bingham and Whitebread 2012; Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016; Dockett and Perry 2013; Laverick and Jalongo 2011). One factor that may contribute to these difficulties is variability in school readiness (SR). Research from multiple countries indicates that alignment between ECE and primary school teachers' beliefs is associated with healthier transitions to primary school (Abry et al. 2015; Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016; Laverick and Jalongo 2011; Puccioni 2018; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008). We therefore sought to explore whether there

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exist differences in SR beliefs among teachers in Uruguay, a South American country where this phenomenon has not yet been studied.

1.1. Defining school readiness

The concept of SR has long been a subject of debate within the fields of education and psychology (Bingham and Whitebread 2012; Dockett and Perry 2013; Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020) and the definition of this concept has evolved over time and adapted to different contexts, empirical findings, and theoretical perspectives.

According to some scholars, SR is a process determined by the child's biological and psychological development, affected by the age of school entry and focused on the individual's potential (Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016; Puccioni 2018; Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020). Critics of this view advocate for a more ecological approach, which considers the influence of social, cultural, and historical contexts. This latter perspective highlights the child's interaction with the environment as a key factor in ensuring a healthy transition to school, thus emphasizing the importance of stable, nurturing relationships and access to enriching, high-quality environments during early education (Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016; Puccioni 2018; Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020).

There is also a debate regarding two distinct aspects of SR: readiness to learn and readiness for school. 'Readiness to learn' refers to the developmental stage at which an individual is capable of learning specific material and focuses on *what* a child is ready to learn rather than *whether* they are ready to learn (Bingham and Whitebread 2012). In contrast, 'readiness for school' implies a fixed level of development that allows children to meet the achievement expectations outlined in the school curriculum at the start of formal schooling, which typically occurs at around 4–5 years old (Bingham and Whitebread 2012). Readiness to learn is more flexible and individualized, taking into account a wider range of developmental factors and tailoring learning to the child's developmental stage. Conversely, readiness for school is more fixed, with specific criteria for school entry; it focuses primarily on cognitive and language skills, and may imply that children are required to adapt to a predetermined curriculum.

In light of these debates, some scholars have broadened the definition of SR to account for the role played by the interaction of children with two large sociocultural systems that promote child development: the family and the school (Vásquez-Echeverría 2022). *Family Readiness* encompasses parents' or caregivers' attitudes and participation in children's early learning. *Educational Center Readiness* refers to the policies and practices that create high-quality early education environments and support healthy transitions to primary school, including adjusting educational programs and content to children's potential (Rebello-Britto and Limlingan 2012).

In this study, we define SR as the set of individual developmental characteristics that enable children to experience a healthy transition to primary school, thereby positively influencing their well-being and educational trajectories (Doherty 1997; Hair et al. 2006; Vásquez-Echeverría et al. 2022; Winter and Kelley 2008). Based on previous research (Brown and Lan 2014; Duncan et al. 2007; Hattie 2008; Morrison et al. 2019), we conceptualize SR as a multidimensional construct encompassing both child development factors (e.g. cognitive, socioemotional, and motor development) and systemic factors (school and family characteristics and their interactions).

Research on SR is crucial for societal and child well-being, as developmental disparities observed at the onset of primary school predict later educational inequalities and are challenging to address (Duncan et al. 2007; Reardon and Portilla 2016; Watts et al. 2014). The transition from kindergarten to primary school involves changes in demands made of children, changes in adults' expectations, and new environments, which lead some children to experience this period as a crisis (Janus and Duku 2007; Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2008; Sameroff and Haith 1996). Some of the relevant changes include reduced playtime, more restrictive use of space, increased homogeneity in activities that highlight individual differences in performance, and new forms of academic assessment, such as grading, which leads, in some countries, to grade repetition for low-performing students (Vásquez-Echeverría 2022). Teacher beliefs about this transition may play a key role in modelling the practices and policies related to SR.

1.2. Teachers' beliefs about SR

Previous research suggests that conceptions of SR may vary across different social agents (Abry et al. 2015; Barbarin et al. 2008; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008). These differences may be attributable to agents' differing roles, institutional contexts and educational backgrounds. According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991) – a model that explains behavior in situations where individuals can exert self-control – attitudes and beliefs can affect how teachers perceive and interpret classroom situations. These perceptions, in turn, shape teachers' intentions and behaviors, ultimately affecting their educational practices.

The concept of belief can be understood as an internal state or disposition to act coherently with one's convictions (Chiappe 2010). Beliefs guide decision-making, differentiating what is considered right or true from what is deemed wrong or false. They can be voluntary or automatic and can be inferred from a person's discourse or actions (Chiappe 2010; Smith and Shepard 1998). Inconsistencies in the beliefs of ECE and primary teachers may lead to divergent expectations for children at each educational level. Such misalignment can negatively impact children's performance and adjustment during the first year of primary school, causing stress and confusion, maladaptive behavior, frustration, or diminished self-esteem (Abry et al. 2015; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008).

Previous studies from the United States and England suggest that ECE teachers, primary school teachers, parents, or policy-makers may differ in how they rate the importance of SR skills. Parents tend to prioritize academic dimensions such as naming objects, letters, numbers, memorization, basic knowledge, and language (Barbarin et al. 2008; Diamond, Reagan, and Bandyk 2010; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; West, Germino-Hausken, and Collins 1993). Educational policy-makers and standards often focus primarily on the cognitive dimension, particularly language skills (Barbarin et al. 2008; Kay 2018). Differences have also been observed between ECE and primary school teachers (Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2008).

Prior studies also suggest that, compared to parents, ECE and primary school teachers tend to place less importance on academic skills. Instead, they focus more on self-regulation and interpersonal skills, such as taking turns, listening to others,

being empathetic, and classroom adjustment (Barbarin et al. 2008; Diamond, Reagan, and Bandyk 2010; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; West, Germino-Hausken, and Collins 1993; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008). Additionally, attitudes toward learning, including interest, commitment, curiosity, and enthusiasm, along with good communication and healthy socioemotional development, are considered important (Abry et al. 2015; Miller and Kehl 2019; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008). As previously noted, differences among teachers in SR beliefs are related to the educational level they teach. For instance, preschool ECE teachers emphasize more academic skills and fewer self-regulation abilities than do kindergarten teachers (Abry et al. 2015; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; but see; Miller and Kehl 2019 for an opposing view). Other studies suggest that preschool teachers emphasize motor skills (e.g. manipulating objects such as putting on a jacket correctly), while primary school teachers focus on frustration tolerance, self-control, and attitudes toward learning (Abry et al. 2015; Diamond, Reagan, and Bandyk 2010; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008).

1.3. The current study

In Uruguay, public preschool education (*Educación Inicial*) starts with ‘Year 3’ classrooms (referred to as Y3, as children begin at age 3), followed by Year 4 (Y4), and Year 5 (Y5). Attendance becomes compulsory from Y4 onwards, and actual enrolment exceeds 95%. Y5 marks the end of ECE, after which children enter Grade 1 (G1) of primary education. All teachers must hold a bachelor’s degree, certified by the National Administration of Education. Since 2017, a specific degree for early childhood education has been available, training professionals specialized to teach children aged 0 to 6. Additionally, since 2008, there has been a unified curriculum for all service providers for children aged 0 to 6 (Leopold-Costábile 2020) that is independent of the primary education curriculum. We note that during ECE in Uruguay, children cannot repeat a grade unless there are highly exceptional circumstances.

We analyze focus groups and interviews with teachers originally conducted to develop components of the School Readiness-Child Development Inventory (*Inventario de Desarrollo Infantil* (INDI), a multidimensional teacher-reported SR assessment system for ECE. INDI was created by a team from the University of the Republic of Uruguay, in collaboration with the National Administration of Public Education authorities and with teachers’ participation. Currently, it is validated and standardized for the Uruguayan population and is administered yearly. It is organized into four dimensions (cognitive, motor, socio-emotional development, and attitudes toward learning) and seven subscales (Vásquez-Echeverría 2022).

In this context, the current study aims to: (a) describe SR beliefs of ECE and G1 Uruguayan teachers, a little-explored topic in the South American context; and (b) identify congruence and misalignments in teacher beliefs across the different instructional levels.

This research provides crucial information for designing educational policies and pedagogical practices that promote smoother transitions between educational stages. Understanding educators’ beliefs and practices can help improve the quality of early education and ensure children’s success and well-being during their first years of schooling. Furthermore, comprehensive SR policies should acknowledge the role of

ECE and G1 teachers' beliefs and address the negative consequences of misalignment during the transition to primary school. Given the potential cross-cultural variability in the importance assigned to SR dimensions (Miller and Kehl 2019), it is important to identify potential differences within the Latin American population to compare research results internationally in the context of differing early education programs and traditions.

2. Method

2.1. Design

We used a qualitative approach to analyze teachers' discourse to advance the understanding of teachers' beliefs about SR at each school level. Data were collected through secondary analysis of audio material from in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with teachers, conducted between 2015 and 2020 throughout the different stages of INDI's creation and implementation. The combination and data triangulation of both interviews and focus groups allow us to capture the depth and content of individual beliefs and experiences and to explore shared perspectives, agreements, and collective meaning-making among colleagues within a group setting. We believe this dual qualitative approach enhances the comprehensiveness of our understanding of teachers' SR beliefs.

2.2. Participants

Forty-one teachers (40 female) participated in this study. The characteristics of the sample are presented in Tables S1.1 and S1.2 in Supplementary Material 1. Seven focus groups and five interviews were carried out. The number of participants in the focus groups ranged from 4 to 8. One teacher participated in two focus groups. Interviewees worked in public schools ($n = 23$), private schools ($n = 5$), and both ($n = 9$), within the metropolitan area of Montevideo, Uruguay's capital city. Four teachers did not report the type of school in which they worked. Twelve teachers taught Y3, seven taught Y4, thirteen taught Y5, and nine taught G1. However, we should note that in the Uruguayan educational system, it is common practice for teachers to regularly shift between levels, especially among Y3, Y4, and Y5. That fact was taken into account during the interviews as teachers were prompted to compare children across levels (if applicable).

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited by invitation using distribution email lists from INDI's website and by snowball sampling (this type of sampling entails participants referring other participants, i.e. teachers who participated in interviews or focus groups were asked to invite other colleagues). All focus groups and interviews were conducted in the University facilities, providing a neutral and safe environment for open discussion, except for two individual interviews in 2020 that were carried out remotely. Unfortunately, three archive audios of interviews with Y4 and Y3 teachers had to be discarded due to technical

problems with the recording (2 interviews) or because the interview was interrupted (1 interview).

A transcript was made from the audio of each interview and focus group using the online tool *oTranscribe*. An edited transcription was made to allow a more transparent coding. The interview guidelines are presented in Supplementary Material 2. Body language, gestures, and other non-verbal expressions were not collected.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Before each interview, participants provided informed consent in a manner that was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Universidad de la República. Confidentiality was ensured during transcription by identifying each participant's intervention with a pseudonym and by deleting references to school names or districts.

2.5. Data analysis

An in-depth reading was performed to identify comments regarding SR elements throughout the transcripts. The Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction (RADaR) technique was chosen for the analysis to reduce the large amount of information. It involves converting data into a more condensed and concise format, which is easier to use (Watkins 2017). Based on the content, three macro-categories were generated to classify text material: Child; Family and Socioeconomic Status (SES); and School. After an analytical reading, the most relevant segments regarding the macro-categories were identified and coded; lists were made for each interview or focus group with segments referring to SR, aggregated according to the school level. For the groups, both partial and total agreement and disagreement among the participants were taken into account. Segments were selected if: (a) they appeared in at least two of the interview transcripts or (b) received support from the other participants and were not countered in the focus groups. These criteria were selected to facilitate data reduction (Watkins 2017). We prioritized ideas that emerged in more than one meeting, which indicated greater importance for the teachers, a greater degree of agreement, and collective sense-making processes.

The further analysis sought to identify specific skills mentioned as necessary for SR at each educational level. The following a priori categories were used to classify the items: cognitive development (logico-mathematic, language, self-projection and executive function), motor development (fine and gross), socioemotional development (externalizing, internalizing, and prosocial behaviors), and approaches to learning. All the items were collapsed according to the three ECE levels and G1. This information can be seen below in Tables 1 and 2. Results will be presented according to the three aforementioned macro-categories. For ease of interpretation, we offer a brief description of these macro-categories.

Table 1. Relevant developmental skills and competencies as reported by teachers at each level (Y3, Y4–5, G1).

	Cognitive*					Motor skills		
	Language	Logical/math	Self-projection	Executive functions	Gross motor	Fine motor	Socioemotional	Approaches to learning
Y3		Knows the number series	Empathy		Body management	Early grip	Teamwork	Sense of wonder
Y4–5	Writes name Syllabic awareness	Recognizes numbers Writes numbers	Symbolic play Play Recognizes emotions	Concentrates Makes decisions	Play motor games Plays games Jumps Climbs Runs Laterality	Writes name	Prosociality	Eager to learn Explores
G1	Phonological awareness Writing Eager to read Good language skills Corresponds grapheme-phoneme Creates a written text	Basic math operations Composes and decomposes numbers	Awareness of others	Organizes him/herself Planning Manages frustration Self-regulation		Writing	Self confidence Manages frustration	Motivation Perseverance Awareness of others Self esteem Socializes Enjoys learning

Y3 = Year 3, Y4–5 = Year 4 and 5, G1 = Grade 1. The categories used to classify the items included in the table correspond to the INDI classification. *Memory and Reflective thinking were mentioned by Y4–5 teachers. As these are global cognitive skills that involve more than one category, they do not appear in this table.

Table 2. Relevant developmental skills and competencies shared by teachers from two or more teaching levels.

Cognitive				Motor skills			
Language	Logical/math	Self-projection	Executive functions	Gross motor	Fine motor	Socioemotional	Approaches to learn
Recognizes his/her name▲	Counting▲	Master temporal notions◇	Focused attention▲	Space management▲	Use of materials▲	Listen to others▲	Autonomy▲
Good communication▲	Recognizes colors▲		Listen to others▲		Grip◇	Positive bonds▲	Habits▲
Narrates events◇	Recites number series◇		Solves everyday problems◇		Copy◇	Sense of safety▲	Curiosity▲
Letter recognition◇	Cardinalizes◇		Respects limits◇			Share◇	Enjoys school▲
Good expression◇			Takes turns®			Emotions®	Follows routines▲
Comprehension®			Recognizes own objects+			Sense of belonging®	Keeps interest◇
			Flexibility+			Friendly®	Creativity+ Imagination+

Y3 = Year 3, Y4–5 = Year 4 and 5, G1 = Grade 1. The categories used to classify the items included in the table correspond to the INDI classification. ▲ = Skills and competencies shared by all the teachers (Y3, Y4–5 and G1). ◇ = Skills and competencies shared by Y4–5 and G1 teachers. ® = Skills and competencies shared by Y3 and Y4–5 teachers. + = Skills and competencies shared by G1 and Y3 teachers.

2.5.1. Child

This category includes general comments on teacher expectations about pre-academic skills and competencies. Particular emphasis is placed on cognitive, socioemotional, and motor areas that teachers consider most important for SR. In addition, discourse referring to children's age, inter-individual variability, and previous academic experience was included.

2.5.2. Family and SES

This macro-category focuses on the perception that teachers have about the attitudes of parents or caregivers, as well as their involvement and support of children's early learning. It includes their opinions about the attitude of family members regarding the provision of a stimulating environment and a committed attitude aligned with what is expected at school. It also includes mentions of barriers to development due to the socio-economic context of the school. In Uruguay, public schools are classified into quintiles based on SES, which is constructed using an index of the attending families' income and their occupational and household information. Quintile 1 comprises the 20% of the schools with the most vulnerable context, while quintile 5 groups comprise the most privileged 20% of schools (Administración Nacional de Educación Pública 2024). In this work, we will refer to 'school SES' when teachers use this categorization. Both 'family' and 'socioeconomic status' were included within the same macro-category since teachers in their discourse usually link both aspects. For this reason, although studies of SR often treat them as separate categories, here they will be treated as one.

2.5.3. School

This includes comments about teachers' perceptions of the role of the school in facilitating the processes of educational transition, mainly the transition from kindergarten to primary school. It includes comments about the school-family relationship. It also incorporates teachers' opinions of their training and compliance with the academic curriculum. Finally, it includes statements concerning the professional guidance and supervision teachers have received.

3. Results

3.1. Child

3.1.1. Y3

Y3 teachers agree that there is considerable variability within and between classrooms concerning children's achievements and performance. They mention that each child has their own pace and that there are individual differences in maturation processes. Disparities emerge mainly in the ability to communicate in the classroom, as some children succeed and can hold a conversation while others do not (e.g. are not able to speak), and in the level of classroom autonomy and demands placed on educators. They state that this is often more difficult for those children having their first ECE experience.

Also, teachers report that some children take longer than expected to adapt when transitioning from home to formal schooling. Children who fail to deploy good adaptation strategies seem to have poorer school attendance, and some

families even postpone attendance at childcare centers until it is mandatory (i.e. Y4). Y3 teachers noted that child age in months or previous attendance at childcare centers can greatly influence adaptation processes. See Supplementary Material 3 (SM3), quote 1, for a sample segment.

Y3 teachers valued playtime, body use, and movement as critical. Most teachers affirmed that activities involving physical activity are not only enjoyable but also highly engaging for children. They emphasized approaches to learning and socioemotional development. However, they mentioned relatively few skills related to cognitive development. In the area of motor development, appropriate body and space management, performance of games involving movement, and correct gripping of objects (such as pencils or scissors) were considered important milestones.

3.1.2. Y4 and Y5

Y4 and Y5 teachers attributed great importance to previous ECE attendance in Y3, and the age in months within the same group. Children's autonomy was also seen as a key aspect to develop and prepare children for Y5. However, not all children can achieve adequate levels of autonomy within the classroom.

Y4/Y5 teachers focussed primarily on cognitive development, mainly executive functioning (e.g. attention to tasks), but also language and mathematics. Specifically, they emphasized communication skills. To a lesser extent, the categories approaches to learning, socioemotional development, and gross motor skills were also represented.

3.1.3. G1

Almost all G1 teachers emphasized the lack of autonomy children have at the beginning of this level. Many cannot solve daily problems independently and cannot comply with hygiene habits (e.g. going to the toilet, washing hands), which generates insecurity for the children (see SM3, quote 2 for a teacher's opinion). They notice that children stand out in arts and gross motor skills, but they observe significant deficiencies in curricular areas such as mathematics and language. In addition, teachers mentioned that many children cannot communicate fluently, nor do they possess precursors of reading and writing that allow them to discriminate word segments (e.g. phonological awareness). As with the previous groups, they mentioned the importance of previous education: they observe advantages in children who attended more years of ECE. They mentioned the importance of self-confidence and of not being afraid of making mistakes during learning as crucial factors for children's success in G1.

These teachers emphasized cognitive skills, especially language, executive functioning, and mathematics. The next-most-cited categories were approaches to learning and socioemotional development. Fine motor skills were considered very important while gross motor skills were barely mentioned.

In Table 1, we show the child skills and competencies most referenced by teachers at each level (i.e. Y3, Y4–5, G1). Table 2 presents skills and competencies commonly referred to among two or more teaching levels (e.g. skills and competencies mentioned both by Y3 and Y4–5 teachers).

3.2. Family and SES

3.2.1. Y3

Almost all Y3 teachers mentioned school SES as a significant conditioning factor for child development and SR. They frequently mentioned that they have to adapt curricular content according to the school SES, as it contributes to lags in children's performance. They observe large inequalities between public (less advantaged) and private institutions. Teachers reported that families greatly influence children's adaptation to school, facilitating or impeding it, and that home stimulation is important for SR skills development, such as by promoting habit acquisition, delay of gratification, and limit-setting. As such, teachers assign importance to the alignment between what is promoted and stimulated within the family and the school context. Finally, some participants mentioned that building rapport, trust and good communication with the family can be difficult, as some parents do not share teachers' perspectives on their children's developmental needs (see SM3, quote 3, for a teacher's comment).

3.2.2. Y4 and Y5

The support and interest of families were repeatedly cited as influential factors for achieving better educational results, even yielding notable differences in performance. Absenteeism was mentioned as harming children and their learning process (see SM3, quote 4 for sample statement). Teachers typically mentioned a change in families' attitudes only when children entered G1, which the parents perceive as a more significant event in children's lives. The teachers offered that this change may be due to the formal assessment methods in G1, where grades are reported, and grade repetition practices are widespread. School SES appears as a major determinant. Teachers reported serious difficulties working in low-SES schools because they must modify curricular planning, which affects long-term learning. In some schools, they feel forced to prioritize individual attention for those who need it the most, such that they end up neglecting average-performing children (see SM3, quote 5, for a participant's opinion).

3.2.3. G1

G1 teachers highlighted the importance of consistency in the educational objectives and messages conveyed by both schools and families. ECE teachers also mentioned the importance of this consistency to some extent. G1 teachers stressed the need to establish open communication channels with families, underscoring the crucial role of parental support during the transition to primary school. Teachers expressed concerns about the negative impact on this transition when children spend extended periods unsupervised due to parental work commitments, which is particularly prevalent in districts facing socio-economic challenges. Additionally, they acknowledged the impact of absenteeism during ECE years on children's learning trajectories, which affects their performance upon entering Grade 1, a concern echoed by teachers at earlier levels. Furthermore, teachers emphasized the significance of parental engagement with early education, noting that parents may respond more positively to assessment methodologies implemented in primary school, such as report cards with grades or the option of grade retention. For the opinion of a teacher in this regard, see SM3, quote 6.

Once again, school SES emerged as something teachers considered to be a significant determinant of children's performance and accomplishments. Particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, SES shapes their readiness profile upon entering Grade 1 across various developmental domains and skill sets. These disparities in readiness profiles compel teachers to adapt their curriculum planning and to concentrate on material that students should already have mastered. Consequently, this adjustment perpetuates academic lags among those most impacted by socioeconomic disadvantages. For a teacher's perspective on this matter, refer to SM3, quote 7.

3.3. School

3.3.1. Y3

Teachers in Y3 emphasized that the primary aim of early education is to offer emotional support and a sense of security to the child. They underscored the significance of incorporating daily activities involving physical movement. The child's emotional and affective domains are considered a priority above cognitive areas such as early arithmetic and language. Additionally, teachers observed that in Y3, progress and transformations are noticeable in all children, even if they don't achieve the anticipated outcomes. See SM3, quote 8, for a teacher's perspective on this matter.

Teachers also raised concerns regarding the role of Early Education Supervisors, noting that at times, their supervisory responsibilities overshadow their role as mentors or guides. Moreover, teachers highlighted the absence of unified criteria for evaluating teachers' performance across various educational levels and identified it as a notable weakness in the system.

3.3.2. Y4 and Y5

Y4 and Y5 educators acknowledged progress in early education for all children but expressed concerns about their readiness for G1. They noted a disconnect between the expectations at the end of Y5 and the beginning of G1, both in curriculum demands and teaching approaches. In preschool, the emphasis is on fostering playfulness, bodily control, and emotional support, echoing sentiments from Y3 teachers. While literacy skills are introduced, socioemotional development takes precedence over cognitive growth. Differences in emphasis are evident at the supervisory level, with ECE supervisors prioritizing socioemotional aspects and primary school supervisors focusing more on academics. These discrepancies also extend to teachers, who lament a lack of communication and shared objectives that could smooth transitions between levels. This issue is particularly pronounced in public education settings.

3.3.3. G1

This group of teachers also highlighted the gap between kindergarten and primary school as a weakness that should be addressed at both levels. They pointed out that, particularly in the public education sector, there is often a lack of coordination between teachers. Major changes impacting the transition include shifts in pedagogical methods, expectations for student achievement, approaches to schoolwork (e.g. transitioning from paper sheets to lined notebooks), and even physical changes in classroom settings (e.g. moving

from carpets to chairs and tables, and working on higher blackboards). Teachers also mentioned the differences in practices and policies between primary and early education supervisors, noting that these divergent demands negatively impact a smooth transition. They criticized the focus on teaching mathematics and language in G1, viewing it as a limitation that forces teachers to neglect other developmental areas, such as motor skills. The teachers also consider the no-retention policy in ECE problematic, as it often results in children advancing to G1 unprepared, which leads to repetition at the primary level.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to describe SR beliefs of ECE and G1 Uruguayan teachers and to identify congruence and misalignments in their beliefs across the different teaching levels. To attain these objectives, we analyzed qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with ECE teachers and G1 teachers in Uruguay.

4.1. Describing SR beliefs in Uruguay

Regarding our first objective, there generally was a strong consensus on the need for adequate socioemotional development and skills related to approaches to learning (e.g. curiosity, autonomy). Teachers across levels emphasized the importance of children acquiring regulatory and interpersonal competencies, which accords with previous findings among pre-k and kindergarten teachers (Abry et al. 2015) and ECE and primary school teachers (Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016). These include good communication skills and empathy, which allow children to express their needs and interact with peers and adults in the classroom setting. These results align with previous work in which teachers also believe a socially competent child (e.g. one able to play and communicate, regulate their emotions, and respond to adult expectations) is more able to benefit from and create positive associations with the schooling experience (Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016; Miller and Kehl 2019; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000).

Another key finding was the relative weight given to academic skills. Even though Y3, Y4, and Y5 teachers stated they assign less importance to academic skills compared to socio-emotional development, G1 teachers overtly emphasized mathematical and language skills as key components of a successful transition. This result replicates recent findings from Australia (Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020). Nonetheless, when asked to name specific competencies required for a successful transition, Y4 and Y5 teachers (but not Y3) named mainly mathematical and language skills, similar to the responses given by G1 teachers. These discrepancies between Y3 and Y4–5 teachers may be an effect of proximity to school transition (less proximate in Y3). Also, this may be due to recent processes and policies aimed at improving school transition and school readiness in Uruguay and align with a similar process found in the US in recent decades (Bassok, Latham, and Rorem 2016; Brown and Lan 2014).

Prior studies have argued that promoting the same educational outcomes and behaviors at school and at home is critical for success in the SR transition (Rebello-Britto and Limlingan 2012; Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008). In this study, the importance of alignment between teacher and family expectations emerged

frequently across interviews and groups, as in previous studies in the United States (Lara-Cinismo et al. 2008) and Portugal (Correia and Marques-Pinto 2016). Most of the teachers expressed concern about forming positive bonds with families and stressed the need to communicate the main educational objectives. Teachers stressed that family beliefs about education play a fundamental role in the child's development, and family support is very important for in-classroom progress. Previous work has noted the importance of identifying misalignment between teachers' and families' school-related expectations, viewing it as a source of potential maladaptive responses at school entry (Miller and Kehl 2019; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000). Identifying and remedying this misalignment is particularly critical in more disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts due to increased exposure of low SES children to risk factors.

4.2. Congruence and misalignment in SR beliefs among ECE and primary school teachers

Concerning our second objective, we found differences in SR beliefs among the different groups of teachers, particularly between ECE and G1 teachers. While all groups of teachers placed great importance on developing approaches to learning skills, G1 teachers repeatedly emphasized autonomy, cognitive development and academic skills as essential for success at primary school entry, an emphasis that accords with previous findings (Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner 2020; Zhang, Sun, and Gai 2008). According to Zhang, Sun, and Gai (2008), ECE teachers place more emphasis on motor skills. This trend was also observed in the present study, mainly regarding gross motor skills; ECE teachers, compared to G1 teachers, were more likely to consider gross motor skills important for the transition to school. Concerning differences in beliefs regarding cognitive abilities, Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner (2020) also found that for the primary school-age participants, academic readiness issues were the most frequently mentioned issue.

Importantly, all teachers acknowledged the existence of a misalignment between ECE and G1 teachers' beliefs and practices regarding SR and the schools' objectives at each level, a finding at odds with the results of Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner (2020). Teachers explained this misalignment as a function of supervision and curricula, which promotes different teaching modalities and emphases. G1 teachers mentioned that the greatest demand from their supervisors was at the cognitive academic level, so that children could start reading and writing. That was not the case for ECE teachers. Also, some teachers pointed out that classroom layout is strongly modified in G1 (e.g. more use of the blackboard, copying in notebooks), while ECE activities emphasize management of space, small-group work, and creative and artistic activities. This classroom organization, as part of a policy, seems to drive some SR beliefs and practices among teachers. Finally, throughout schools and grades, teachers reported feeling a lack of communication amongst staff, including supervisors and teachers from other levels. This may hinder educational planning, specifically regarding school transition.

According to Abry et al. (2015), misalignment between preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs in academic, self-regulatory, and interpersonal domains predicted children's approaches to learning, social skills, and math achievement. They showed there is an interaction between SR teacher belief misalignment and SES, with low-SES children more likely to suffer the negative effects of discrepancies. These consequences of

misalignments in belief systems indicate an area for improvement in educational and SR policies in Uruguay.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

This study did not record or analyze non-verbal gestures and communication. Regarding sample composition, there are differing numbers of teachers per group and in individual interviews. These limitations could be addressed in future studies by conducting quantitative research, including self-administered questionnaires where teachers report their level of agreement with different SR-belief items. Because SR practices and beliefs are a confluence of policy, family, and school factors, all stakeholders should be included to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Future studies could analyze families' and decision-makers' beliefs about SR. Finally, and due to the gap that may exist between beliefs and behaviors, contrasting teachers' discourse with their classroom practices would also provide valuable information for future research.

5. Conclusions and implications

This study identified discrepancies in SR beliefs between ECE and primary school teachers in Uruguay, highlighting areas that need prioritizing to foster smoother transitions for children. Differences suggest a misalignment between beliefs about the exit goals of ECE and the entry objectives of primary education. Effective transition policies may benefit from reducing these differences in objectives across educational cycles.

Several areas of child development were identified as priorities for both educational cycles. Key areas include the development of assertive social communication in children, adaptation to educational environments, the development of autonomy, and the need to support family involvement aligned with school objectives. Conversely, we also identified areas where achieving consensus may be more challenging. The main difference lies in some aspects of cognitive and pre-academic skills, and the role of school in promoting development and learning at each educational level. Also, given the discrepancies in teacher beliefs and supervisory demands, it is crucial to address these issues collaboratively across both educational cycles and stakeholders. Public policy strategies should support these needs by providing opportunities for teacher training and coordination.

Note

1. In this paper, 'early childhood education' refers to the education of children aged 3–5. In countries such as the United States, these years comprise preschool and kindergarten and are typically not compulsory. By contrast, in Uruguay, two years of pre-primary education (i.e. at age 4 and 5) is both free and compulsory.

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