

Assessing School Readiness in Sri Lanka: A Baseline Study for a Play-Based Child-to- Child Transition Programme

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ABSTRACT

The transition from preschool to primary education is a critical stage in children's educational development, yet context-specific baseline evidence on school readiness remains limited in Sri Lanka. This study assessed preschool children's readiness before the implementation of a play-based Child-to-Child (C2C) transition programme and examined how baseline evidence can inform context-responsive transition support. A mixed-methods baseline assessment was conducted with 149 children aged 4-6 years from 10 preschools in the Western Province of Sri Lanka selected through convenience sampling. Structured assessment instruments measured literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills, while preschool teachers provided qualitative observations. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages, and teacher observations were analysed thematically. Overall readiness was high: 94.6% of children were classified as Fully Ready in numeracy, 90.6% in literacy, and 85.9% in socio-emotional skills. Gender differences were generally small, although boys showed lower socio-emotional readiness than girls. Children in the semi-urban preschools included in the study showed comparatively lower literacy and socio-emotional readiness than those in the urban and rural settings. Teacher observations highlighted needs in self-management, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and responsible decision-making. The findings provide a baseline for tailoring the C2C intervention and for subsequent evaluation. More broadly, the study demonstrates the value of context-specific readiness assessment for designing play-based, peer-supported transition programmes in settings where locally grounded evidence is limited.

Keywords: school readiness; Child-to-Child (C2C) approach; play-based learning; socio-emotional skills; baseline assessment

INTRODUCTION

The transition from preschool to primary school is a critical stage in a child's educational development and is associated with later academic achievement, social adjustment, and school engagement. A successful transition can support children's learning and well-being, whereas difficulties during this period may affect their long-term educational experiences. As a result, increasing attention has been given to approaches that support school readiness and facilitate positive transitions to formal schooling.

Play-based learning is widely recognized as an effective approach for promoting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and language development during the early years. Similarly, peer-supported learning approaches have been found to enhance children's participation, communication, and collaborative learning experiences. The Child-to-Child (C2C) approach combines these principles by encouraging children to learn through interaction, cooperation, and peer support. This approach has been increasingly applied in educational settings to promote engagement and facilitate learning among young children.

Despite growing interest in school readiness and transition programmes, evidence on preschool children's readiness in Sri Lanka before the introduction of transition interventions remains limited. This creates a practical problem for programme design: without a clear baseline, it is difficult to determine which competencies are already well established, which require targeted support, and whether later changes can reasonably be assessed against pre-intervention conditions. Baseline evidence is particularly important for a Child-to-Child approach because peer-supported and play-based activities need to respond to children's existing literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional capacities rather than assume a uniform level of readiness.

This study therefore presents a baseline assessment conducted as part of the Scaling Impact of a Play-Based Child-to-Child Approach to Make Preschool to Primary School Transition Fun and Inclusive initiative in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The assessment examined readiness across literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills among 149 children attending 10 preschools. In addition to informing the Sri Lankan intervention, the study contributes to the wider discussion on school transition by illustrating how context-specific readiness evidence can guide the design and later evaluation of play-based, peer-supported programmes in education systems where locally grounded baseline data are limited.

The study aimed to assess the school readiness of preschool children prior to implementation of the Child-to-Child transition programme. Specifically, it sought to examine baseline levels of literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills among participating children; explore variations in readiness across gender and geographical location; identify strengths and areas requiring support to inform programme content,

pedagogical approaches, and support mechanisms; provide evidence to guide the design of play-based transition activities; and establish benchmark data for evaluating change during subsequent assessments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 School Readiness and Transition to Primary Education

The transition from preschool to primary school is widely recognized as a critical period in children's educational development. This transition involves not only entering a new learning environment but also adapting to different expectations, routines, social relationships, and learning experiences. Research has consistently demonstrated that children's readiness for school is associated with later academic achievement, social adjustment, and overall educational success (Pianta & Cox, 2002). Consequently, school readiness has become an important focus within early childhood education and educational policy across many countries.

School readiness is generally viewed as a multidimensional construct encompassing children's literacy, numeracy, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. Contemporary perspectives emphasize that readiness should not be limited to academic preparedness alone. Rather, children should possess a range of skills that enable them to participate meaningfully in classroom activities, interact positively with peers and teachers, regulate their behaviour, and adapt to new learning environments. Children who enter school with stronger readiness skills are more likely to experience positive educational outcomes, whereas those with limited readiness may encounter difficulties in learning, participation, and adjustment.

Among the various dimensions of school readiness, literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills are considered particularly important during the transition to formal schooling. Early literacy skills provide the foundation for communication, language development, and later academic learning. Similarly, numeracy skills contribute to children's understanding of mathematical concepts and problem-solving abilities. Socio-emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, cooperation, empathy, and responsible decision-making support children's ability to function effectively within classroom environments and establish positive relationships with others. Research indicates that these domains are interrelated and collectively influence children's readiness to engage successfully in primary education.

2.2 Play-Based Learning and School Readiness

Play-based learning has long been recognized as a developmentally appropriate approach to early childhood education. Through play, children actively construct knowledge, explore their environment, solve problems, and develop social relationships. Unlike highly

structured instructional approaches, play-based learning provides opportunities for children to learn through meaningful experiences that are relevant to their developmental needs and interests.

Studies have shown that play contributes significantly to children's language development, creativity, critical thinking, social competence, and emotional regulation. Through collaborative play activities, children learn to communicate, negotiate, share, take turns, and resolve conflicts. These experiences contribute directly to the development of skills required for successful school participation. Consequently, play-based approaches are increasingly promoted as effective strategies for supporting school readiness and facilitating children's transition to formal education.

Furthermore, play-based learning may be particularly valuable during periods of educational transition. Entering primary school can be associated with anxiety, uncertainty, and adjustment challenges for young children. Play-based activities provide opportunities for children to become familiar with new routines, develop confidence, and establish positive peer relationships in supportive learning environments. As a result, many contemporary transition programmes incorporate play-based pedagogies as a means of promoting both academic and socio-emotional readiness.

2.3 Child-to-Child Learning Approach

The Child-to-Child (C2C) approach is a participatory learning model that encourages children to learn from and support one another through collaborative activities and peer interaction. Originating as a child-centred educational strategy, the approach is based on the principle that children are active contributors to learning rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Through peer teaching, shared problem-solving, and collaborative participation, children are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning while supporting the learning of others.

The theoretical foundations of the Child-to-Child approach can be linked to both Social Learning Theory and Sociocultural Theory. Bandura (1977) emphasized the importance of observation, modelling, and social interaction in learning, while Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the role of social engagement and peer support in children's cognitive development. From these perspectives, interaction with more knowledgeable peers can facilitate learning and promote the development of new skills.

Research examining Child-to-Child approaches has reported positive outcomes in a variety of educational contexts. Studies have found that peer-supported learning can enhance communication skills, self-confidence, participation, leadership, problem-solving abilities, and social responsibility (Farrokhmanesh et al., 2018; Hamdon & Evans, 2022). Child-to-Child approaches have also been used successfully in health education, life-skills development, and community-based learning programmes. Importantly, the collaborative

and participatory nature of the approach aligns closely with the developmental needs of young children and the principles of play-based learning.

Within transition programmes, the Child-to-Child approach has the potential to support children's adjustment to school by creating opportunities for peer interaction, social support, and shared learning experiences. Through engagement with peers, children may develop both academic competencies and socio-emotional skills that contribute to successful participation in formal education.

2.4 Theoretical Perspective and Research Gap

The present study is informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasized that children's development is influenced by interactions within multiple environmental systems, including families, schools, communities, and broader social contexts. School readiness and transition experiences are therefore shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by the quality of support available within these interconnected systems. Vygotsky's theory further highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning in children's development, providing a strong theoretical basis for peer-supported approaches such as Child-to-Child learning.

Although international research has highlighted the importance of school readiness and demonstrated the potential benefits of play-based and Child-to-Child approaches, empirical evidence within the Sri Lankan context remains limited. In particular, little is known about the readiness levels of preschool children prior to the implementation of transition interventions. Furthermore, baseline evidence is needed to identify children's strengths and areas requiring support, inform programme design, and provide benchmarks for evaluating programme effectiveness. This study addresses this gap by assessing literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional readiness among preschool children before the implementation of a play-based Child-to-Child transition programme in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design, Setting and Participants

This study employed a mixed-methods baseline assessment design to examine children's school readiness prior to implementation of the project, Scaling Impact of a Play-Based Child-to-Child (C2C) Approach to Make the Transition from Preschool to Primary School Fun and Inclusive. The study combined quantitative assessments of literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills with qualitative teacher observations to obtain a comprehensive understanding of children's readiness for the transition to primary education. The baseline findings were intended to inform programme planning, identify areas requiring support, and establish benchmark data for evaluating programme outcomes.

The study was conducted in ten preschools located in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. A total of 149 children aged between 4 and 6 years participated in the assessment. All eligible children enrolled in the selected preschools were included in the study. The participants represented urban, semi-urban, and rural settings, allowing for comparisons across different geographical contexts.

In addition to the child assessments, qualitative information was gathered through teacher observations to provide contextual insights into children's developmental strengths and challenges, particularly in relation to socio-emotional competencies.

A convenience sampling strategy was employed to select preschools participating in the project. The selected preschools represented diverse educational and geographical contexts within the Western Province and were considered suitable for implementing the Child-to-Child intervention. All children within the target age range who were enrolled in the selected preschools were assessed, resulting in a total sample of 149 children.

3.2 Assessment Instruments and Procedures

The baseline assessment utilized a set of school readiness instruments developed and adapted specifically for the objectives of the Child-to-Child transition programme. The instruments were designed to assess three core domains of school readiness: literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills.

The instrument development process involved two stages: a Tool Adaptation Workshop and a Tool Validation Workshop. These workshops brought together preschool teachers, early childhood education specialists, university academics, project staff, and other relevant stakeholders. The purpose of the workshops was to review the content, developmental appropriateness, cultural relevance, inclusiveness, and clarity of the assessment tools.

Particular attention was given to ensuring that the instruments reflected the Sri Lankan context and were suitable for children from diverse linguistic, social, and educational backgrounds, including children from vulnerable groups. Feedback obtained during the workshops was used to revise and refine the instruments. The final versions were translated into Sinhala and Tamil to facilitate implementation across different language groups.

The instruments were validated through expert review and stakeholder consultation during the adaptation and validation workshops. No statistical measures of reliability or validity were calculated as part of the baseline assessment process.

- School readiness was assessed across three domains: literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills.
- The literacy assessment evaluated six dimensions: Speaking and Listening, Reading and Viewing, Writing and Representing, Language Structures and Features, Skills and Strategies, and Communicative Purpose.

- The numeracy assessment examined four dimensions: Number Concepts, Length, Mass and Capacity, Positions and Directions, and Mathematical Process Skills.
- The socio-emotional skills assessment evaluated five dimensions: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making.

Together, these domains provided a comprehensive assessment of children's readiness for participation in formal schooling.

Data collection was conducted over a period of three weeks by trained enumerators. Prior to field implementation, enumerators participated in a training programme that familiarized them with the assessment tools, administration procedures, data recording protocols, and approaches to capturing Gender Equality and Inclusion (GEI) indicators. The training also emphasized the importance of collecting data consistently across different social and demographic groups.

Each child was individually assessed using a combination of structured tasks, observations, and age-appropriate activities. The assessment process was designed to capture children's competencies across literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional domains in a child-friendly manner.

In addition to the quantitative assessments, teachers provided qualitative observations regarding children's behaviours, interactions, strengths, and developmental challenges. These observations offered valuable contextual information that complemented the quantitative findings.

Each assessment dimension was scored using a three-point readiness scale:

- **3 = Fully Ready (FR):** Demonstrates consistent mastery of age-appropriate skills and concepts within the dimension.
- **2 = Developing (D):** Demonstrates emerging understanding and inconsistent application of skills and requires some support to achieve full readiness.
- **1 = Needs Support (NS):** Requires significant guidance and intervention to develop foundational skills within the dimension.

Scores were aggregated across dimensions to determine readiness levels within each domain and to generate overall school readiness profiles for the participating children.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each readiness category (Fully Ready, Developing, and Needs Support) across the literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skill domains. Comparisons were conducted by gender and geographical location (urban, semi-urban, and rural) to identify patterns and disparities in school readiness.

Qualitative data from teacher observations were analysed thematically. Observations recorded in Sinhala and English were reviewed and organized according to the five socio-emotional skill dimensions: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. Recurring patterns, behaviours, and developmental concerns were identified and grouped into themes. These qualitative findings provided contextual explanation and enriched the interpretation of the quantitative results.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Western Provincial Department of Education prior to data collection. Permission was also obtained from the participating preschool authorities. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians before children participated in the assessment. Participation was voluntary, and all information collected was treated confidentially. No identifying information was included in the analysis or reporting of findings. Data were used solely for research and programme development purposes related to the Child-to-Child transition initiative.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Figure 1: Overall Readiness Levels Across Domains

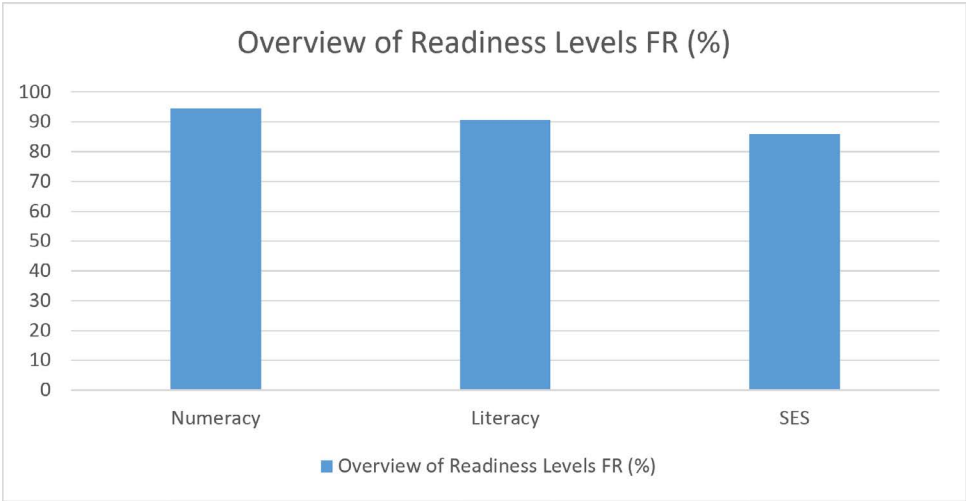


Figure 1 presents overall school readiness across the three assessed domains. Numeracy demonstrated the highest level of readiness, with 94.6% of children classified as Fully Ready, followed by literacy (90.6%) and socio-emotional skills (85.9%). The proportion classified as Developing ranged from 5.4% in numeracy to 10.7% in socio-emotional skills, while 3.4% were classified as Needs Support in socio-emotional skills. This pattern indicates that the intervention can build on relatively strong foundational academic readiness while giving particular attention to socio-emotional competencies.

4.1.1 Overall School Readiness

Table 1: Overall School Readiness Across Domains

Skill Domain	FR (%)	D (%)	NS (%)
Numeracy	94.6	5.4	0
Literacy	90.6	9.4	0
SES	85.9	10.7	3.4

4.1.2 School Readiness by Gender

Figure 2: School Readiness by Gender

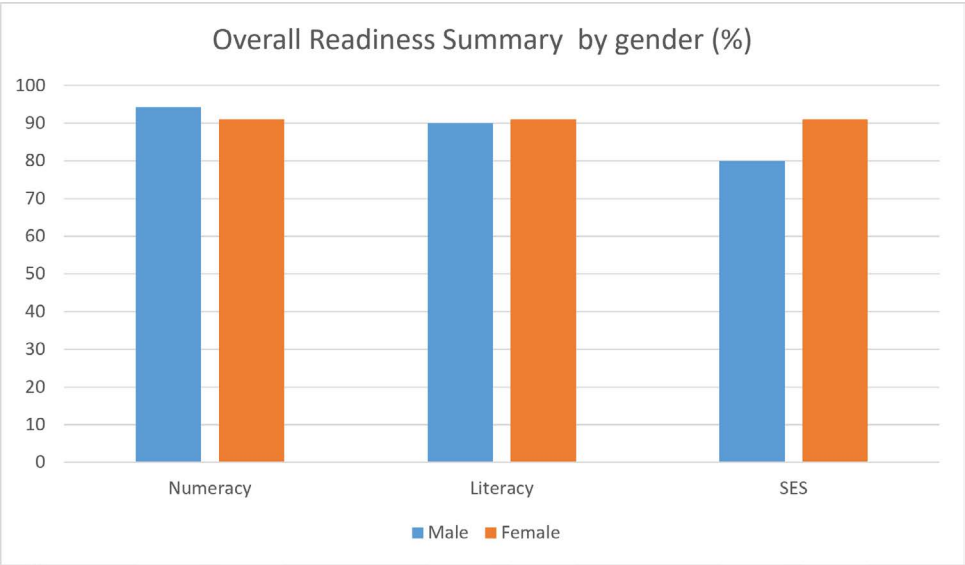


Table 2: School Readiness by Gender

Gender	Numeracy FR	Literacy FR	SES FR
Male	94.3%	90.0%	80.0%
Female	91.1%	91.1%	91.1%

Table 2 presents school readiness levels by gender. Both male and female children demonstrated high readiness across literacy and numeracy. Male children recorded Fully Ready levels of 94.3% in numeracy, 90.0% in literacy, and 80.0% in socio-emotional skills. Female children recorded 91.1% Fully Ready in numeracy, literacy, and socio-emotional skills. The largest observed gender difference was therefore in socio-emotional readiness. As the analysis is descriptive, these percentages indicate a pattern within the study sample rather than a statistically established gender effect.

4.1.3 School Readiness by Location

Table 3: School Readiness by Location

Location	Numeracy FR	Literacy FR	SES FR
Urban (48)	95.8%	93.8%	87.5%
Semi-urban (38)	97.4%	78.9%	71.1%
Rural (63)	92.1%	95.2%	93.7%

Table 3 presents school readiness levels by geographical location. Numeracy readiness was high across the three locations, ranging from 92.1% to 97.4%. Literacy readiness was highest among children in rural preschools (95.2%) and lowest among children in semi-urban preschools (78.9%). Socio-emotional readiness followed a similar pattern, with 93.7% Fully Ready in rural settings and 71.1% in semi-urban settings. These descriptive differences identify the semi-urban sites in this sample as settings where literacy and socio-emotional support may warrant particular attention; the baseline design does not establish why these differences occurred.

Figure 3: School Readiness by Location

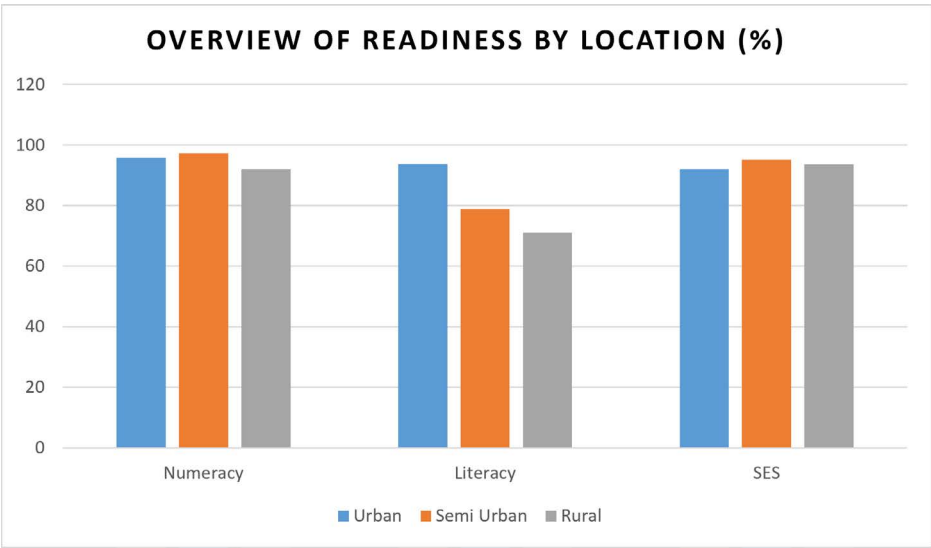


Table 4: Numeracy Readiness by Dimension

Dimension	Fully Ready (FR)	%	Developing (D)	%	Needs Support (NS)	%
1. Number Concept	138	92.6	11	7.4	0	0.0
2. Length, Mass and Capacity	139	93.3	10	6.7	0	0.0
3. Positions and Directions	138	92.6	11	7.4	0	0.0
4. Mathematical process skillsMathematical process skills	139	93.3	10	6.7	0	0.0

4.1.4 Numeracy Readiness

Table 4 presents children's readiness across the four numeracy dimensions. The highest level of readiness was observed in Length, Mass and Capacity and Mathematical Process Skills, with 93.3% of children classified as Fully Ready in each dimension. Number Concept and Positions and Directions both recorded 92.6% of children as Fully Ready. The proportion of children classified as Developing ranged from 6.7% to 7.4%, while no children were classified as Needs Support in any of the numeracy dimensions. The consistently high scores across the four dimensions suggest that numeracy was a relative strength at baseline and may require consolidation rather than broad remedial emphasis in the transition programme.

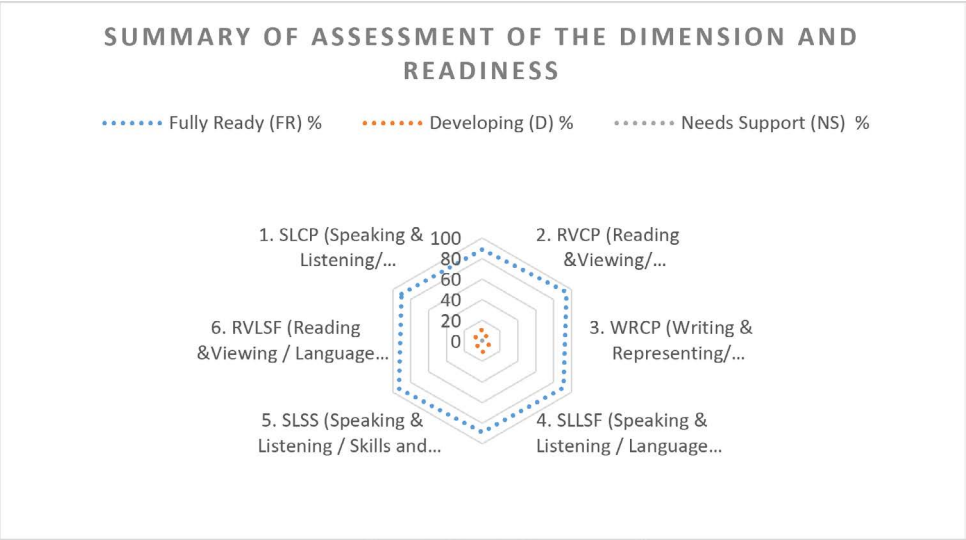
Table 5: Literacy Readiness by Dimension

Dimension	Fully Ready (FR)	%	Developing (D)	%	Needs Support (NS)	%
1. SLCP (Speaking & Listening/ Communicative Purpose)	132	88.6	17	11.4	0	0.0
2. RVCP (Reading & Viewing/ Communicative Purpose)	140	94.6	8	5.4	1	0.7
3. WRCP (Writing & Representing/ Communicative Purpose)	134	89.9	13	8.7	2	1.3
4. SLLSF (Speaking & Listening / Language Structures and Features).	132	88.6	17	11.4	0	0.0
5. SLSS (Speaking & Listening / Skills and Strategies)	138	92.6	11	7.4	0	0.0
6. RVLSF (Reading & Viewing / Language Structures and Features)	133	88.6	13	8.7	3	2.0

4.1.5 Literacy Readiness

Table 5 presents children's readiness across the six literacy dimensions. The highest level of readiness was observed in Reading and Viewing/Communicative Purpose (94.6%), followed by Speaking and Listening/Skills and Strategies (92.6%). Writing and Representing/Communicative Purpose recorded 89.9% Fully Ready, while Speaking and Listening/Communicative Purpose, Speaking and Listening/Language Structures and Features, and Reading and Viewing/Language Structures and Features each recorded 88.6%. Developing classifications ranged from 5.4% to 11.4%. Needs Support was recorded for Reading and Viewing/Communicative Purpose (0.7%), Writing and Representing/Communicative Purpose (1.3%), and Reading and Viewing/Language Structures and Features (2.0%). The variation across dimensions suggests that transition activities should retain broad literacy support while placing additional emphasis on language structures, communicative use, and emergent writing.

Figure 5: Literacy Readiness Across Assessed Dimensions



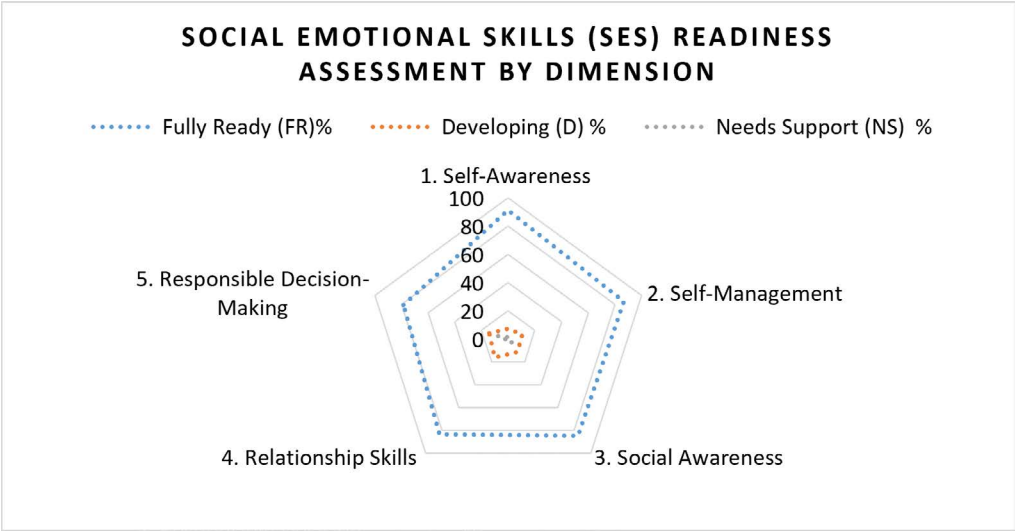
4.1.6 Socio-Emotional Skills (SES) Readiness

Table 6: Socio-Emotional Skills Readiness by Dimension

Dimension	Fully Ready (FR)	%	Developing (D)	%	Needs Support (NS)	%
1. Self-Awareness	136	91.3	11	7.4	2	1.3
2. Self-Management	129	86.6	16	10.7	4	2.7
3. Social Awareness	126	84.6	17	11.4	6	4.0
4. Relationship Skills	124	83.2	24	16.1	1	0.7

Table 6 presents children's readiness across the five socio-emotional skill dimensions. Self-Awareness recorded the highest level of readiness, with 91.3% of children classified as Fully Ready, followed by Self-Management (86.6%) and Social Awareness (84.6%). Relationship Skills recorded 83.2% of children as Fully Ready, while Responsible Decision-Making showed the lowest readiness level at 77.2%. The proportion of children classified as Developing ranged from 7.4% to 16.1% across the dimensions. The highest percentage of children classified as Needs Support was observed in Responsible Decision-Making (7.4%), followed by Social Awareness (4.0%) and Self-Management (2.7%). The comparatively lower readiness in Responsible Decision-Making and Relationship Skills identifies these competencies as priority areas for play-based and peer-supported transition activities.

Figure 6: Socio-Emotional Skills Readiness by Dimension



In addition to the quantitative findings, qualitative observations were collected from preschool teachers to provide contextual insights into children's readiness for school transition.

4.2 Qualitative Findings from Teacher Observations

Teacher observations provided additional insights into children's readiness for school transition. Teachers generally reported that children demonstrated confidence in participating in classroom activities and interacting with peers. Most children were able to follow classroom routines and engage in collaborative learning activities with minimal support.

However, teachers also identified areas requiring further development, particularly in relation to self-management, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and responsible decision-making. Some children experienced difficulties maintaining attention during activities, regulating emotions, and considering the consequences of their actions. Teachers further noted that while most children interacted positively with peers, a small number required additional support to develop cooperation and problem-solving skills during group activities.

Overall, the qualitative findings supported quantitative results, particularly the comparatively lower readiness levels observed in the socio-emotional domain. These findings suggest the importance of incorporating activities that strengthen self-regulation, social interaction, and decision-making within school transition programmes.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study examined baseline school readiness before implementation of a play-based Child-to-Child (C2C) transition programme in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. Participating children showed high overall readiness in numeracy and literacy, while socio-emotional readiness was comparatively lower. These findings extend the Sri Lankan evidence base by identifying both competencies on which the intervention can build and areas requiring targeted support. They also reinforce the multidimensional view of school readiness described in the literature: readiness for primary education involves not only academic foundations but also the social and emotional capacities needed to participate, cooperate, regulate behaviour, and adapt to new classroom expectations (Pianta & Cox, 2002).

Numeracy emerged as the strongest domain, with 94.6% of children classified as Fully Ready overall and more than 92% Fully Ready in each assessed numeracy dimension. This provides a strong baseline foundation for transition activities involving counting, measurement, spatial concepts, and mathematical processes. The result is consistent with the broader literature emphasizing the importance of early academic competencies for later school participation and achievement (Pianta & Cox, 2002). However, because this study used descriptive baseline data, the findings should be interpreted as a profile of readiness in the participating sample rather than evidence about the causes of children's numeracy performance.

Literacy readiness was also high overall (90.6%), but the dimension-level results reveal meaningful variation. Reading and Viewing/Communicative Purpose and Speaking and Listening/Skills and Strategies were relative strengths, whereas several language-structure and communicative dimensions were lower. This pattern supports retaining language-rich, interactive activities within the transition programme rather than treating high overall literacy readiness as evidence that all literacy needs have been met. Serpell (2020) similarly emphasizes that literacy development is embedded in children's communicative and sociocultural experiences. For programme design, play, storytelling, dialogue, emergent writing, and peer interaction can therefore be used to consolidate literacy while responding to the weaker dimensions identified at baseline.

Among the three domains, socio-emotional skills showed the lowest overall readiness (85.9%), with Responsible Decision-Making (77.2%) and Relationship Skills (83.2%) emerging as the dimensions with the greatest need for support. Teacher observations converged with this quantitative pattern by identifying challenges in self-management, turn-taking, conflict resolution, attention, emotional regulation, and consideration of consequences. These findings are important because the transition to primary school requires children to manage routines and relationships as well as academic tasks (Pianta

& Cox, 2002). They also provide a clear rationale for C2C activities that create structured opportunities for cooperation, shared problem-solving, communication, and peer interaction, consistent with the social and collaborative learning principles associated with Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1977).

The findings also revealed descriptive differences across geographical locations. Children attending the semi-urban preschools in this sample showed lower literacy and socio-emotional readiness than those in the urban and rural preschools. The study was not designed to identify the determinants of these differences, and no causal explanation can therefore be established from the available data. Rather than attributing the pattern to particular resources or learning opportunities, the finding indicates the importance of context-responsive implementation and of examining, in future research, the individual, family, preschool, and community factors that may be associated with geographical variation.

Gender differences were generally small in literacy and numeracy, while boys showed lower socio-emotional readiness than girls within this sample. Because the analysis was descriptive and did not test statistical significance, this pattern should not be interpreted as evidence of a general gender difference. For programme implementation, it nevertheless supports providing all children with inclusive opportunities to practise self-regulation, cooperation, communication, and relationship skills and monitoring whether participation and progress differ by gender over time.

The findings have direct implications for the C2C transition programme. High baseline numeracy and literacy readiness suggests that activities can focus on consolidation and application, while comparatively lower socio-emotional readiness indicates a need for deliberate emphasis on responsible decision-making, relationship skills, self-management, and social awareness. The peer-supported character of C2C is relevant to these priorities because it organizes learning through interaction, modelling, collaboration, and support from other children, mechanisms consistent with Social Learning Theory and Sociocultural Theory (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time, the baseline cannot demonstrate that C2C will improve these outcomes; that question requires comparison with subsequent assessments.

For practice, the baseline supports a differentiated approach to programme design: maintain opportunities to consolidate strong numeracy foundations; strengthen language-rich literacy experiences; give explicit attention to socio-emotional competencies; provide additional support where lower readiness is observed; prepare teachers and facilitators to use play-based and C2C strategies responsively; and engage families in reinforcing learning. For educators beyond Sri Lanka, the broader contribution lies not in assuming that the same readiness profile will apply elsewhere, but in demonstrating how a multidimensional

baseline can be used to tailor peer-supported transition programmes to local patterns of strength and need.

5.1 Programme Design Implications

Based on the baseline findings, programme implementation should prioritize six evidence-informed actions:

1. **Strengthen literacy development:** Incorporate play-based activities that promote language development, emergent writing, communication, and literacy skills, particularly in the areas of Writing and Representing and Language Structures and Features.
2. **Enhance socio-emotional learning:** Develop activities that support self-regulation, responsible decision-making, relationship-building, cooperation, turn-taking, and conflict resolution, as these areas demonstrated comparatively lower readiness levels.
3. **Provide differentiated support:** Offer additional learning opportunities and targeted assistance for children who require greater support, particularly in preschools and contexts where lower readiness levels were observed.
4. **Strengthen facilitator and teacher capacity:** Provide training for teachers and programme facilitators on play-based learning, Child-to-Child methodologies, differentiated instruction, and strategies for supporting diverse learners.
5. **Promote family engagement:** Encourage parents and caregivers to participate in children's learning through home-based activities and guidance that reinforce literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development.
6. **Establish ongoing monitoring and evaluation:** Use the baseline findings as a benchmark for monitoring children's progress throughout programme implementation and for evaluating the effectiveness of the Child-to-Child intervention through subsequent assessments.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations should be considered. First, the study used convenience sampling in 10 preschools in one province; the findings therefore describe the participating children and should not be generalized to all preschool children in Sri Lanka. Second, the analysis was descriptive and did not test the statistical significance or causes of observed gender or location differences. Third, classroom space, available resources, and the time available for assessment varied across settings and may have influenced data collection. Fourth, limited parental input restricted examination of home learning contexts. Finally, instrument validation relied on expert review and stakeholder consultation, and no statistical reliability or validity estimates were calculated. These limitations should guide interpretation of the baseline and the design of subsequent evaluation phases.

In conclusion, this baseline assessment found high overall readiness in numeracy and literacy among participating preschool children, alongside comparatively lower readiness in socio-emotional skills, particularly Responsible Decision-Making and Relationship Skills. The results provide a clear evidence base for tailoring the Sri Lankan C2C transition programme to consolidate academic foundations while strengthening the interpersonal and self-regulatory competencies required for successful school transition. The baseline also establishes a benchmark against which subsequent assessments can examine change over time.

Future phases should use the same core readiness domains, where methodologically appropriate, to assess change after programme implementation and should strengthen the evidence base through broader sampling and appropriate inferential or longitudinal analyses. Future research should also examine the contextual factors associated with the location patterns observed at baseline. Such evidence will be necessary before drawing conclusions about programme effectiveness or the determinants of readiness differences.

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