



Linkages Between Early Childhood, School Success, and High School Completion

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Topic

School completion

Problem

In industrialized societies, the consequences of dropping out of school before receiving a high school diploma are considerable for both individuals and society as a whole. Compared to national averages, dropouts are more likely to be recipients of welfare and unemployment insurance,¹ experience more physical and mental health problems, engage in illegal activities, and are more prone to psychoactive substance abuse. Dropouts are also less involved in their communities and grow up to become parents whose children are at increased risk of experiencing problems at school and dropping out.² Although it has not been clearly established that all of these problems result from leaving school early, it is plausible that dropping out would compound a number of them. In Canada, roughly one child out of five has still not received his/her high school diploma by age 20. Males in this category outnumber females two to one.

Research Context

For many dropouts, school difficulties in childhood are precursors to dropping out.³ However, problems at school may originate partly during the preschool years. A number of studies have shown that personal factors, such as language disorders, attention deficits, and difficulties with recognizing and using the sounds of spoken words prior to the age of six, are predictors of academic difficulties and, ultimately, of premature departure from school.^{4,5} Other studies have highlighted the fact that the family environment and parental practices before the age of four are associated with dropping out; this linkage seems to persist even when consequent behaviour and learning difficulties in elementary school are taken into account.⁶ The apparent connection between behavioural problems in elementary school and academic difficulties on the one hand, and premature departure from school on the other, appear to be largely attributable to a strong correlation with attention deficits.^{7,8,9} Problems such as aggression and poor self-regulation may nevertheless be indirectly connected to school difficulties because of the social exclusion and negative sanctions they trigger among fellow students and school authorities.¹⁰⁻¹³ It should be noted that these risk factors continue to hold even when the children's intellectual capabilities are taken into consideration,^{6,14} and that problem behaviours can

aggravate school difficulties, and vice versa. At the same time, factors such as social skills acquired by the child or positive but firm discipline practiced by the parents may have a protective or compensatory effect.^{9,15} However, we must bear in mind that behaviour and learning difficulties in elementary school and their attendant negative cascades of events (such as grade-repeating or placement in a special education class) can be predicted during the preschool years through variables linked to the characteristics in children, their parents, and in the family dynamic, as previously indicated. In that sense, rather than being original determinants, problems at the elementary school level must be seen as intermediary elements in the developmental chain of events that lead to dropping out, although several contextual variables may amplify their predictive value. For example, special teaching methods used by teachers or attendance at a good school may weaken the relationship between the children's personal and socio-familial characteristics already present at preschool age, on the one hand, and the subsequent risks of non-completion, on the other.¹⁶ Conversely, negative interactions between the teachers and students or the absence of a clear school disciplinary code may intensify the above-mentioned effects or have a specific additive effect, and therefore contribute hastening the premature cessation of studies.¹⁷⁻²⁰ While these aspects of the school environment should not be underestimated given their significant contribution to the observed variability in the trajectories of at-risk children, that contribution cannot occur before the children actually start going to school, unlike the risk factors and protective/compensatory factors present during the preschool years. In this sense, other risk factors such as low parental education levels and negative parental attitudes towards school deserve consideration because they also predict academic failure. In fact, their predictive value is greater than that of the family poverty level.²¹⁻²² However, a family's socio-economic status remains highly predictive, over and above the personal and family characteristics of a child.^{6,18}

Key Research Questions and Recent Research Results

Higher levels of academic failure among disadvantaged families and in some cultural communities is due partly to the parents' differing views of and attitudes towards school and partly to their limited ability to help their children in developing behaviours that are conducive to school learning and in engaging less in those that are not.²³ Consequently, instead of leaving the parents to fend for themselves, with the risk that they may get discouraged and give up, some authors have set up failure and dropout prevention programs so that any risk factors present during the preschool years need not give rise to new risk factors that will make the situation increasingly difficult to change. Some programs for preschoolers have been rigorously evaluated and produced positive results. Space constraints prevent us from providing any more than a very brief overview of these programs in this article (see Table 1).²⁴

It should be noted that the programs described in Table 1 were all instituted before the children reached the age of six, and that few of them were conducted compared to the programs for children at age six and older.²⁵ Other programs conducted with preschoolers are not mentioned in this Table since they did not gather information on school success (e.g., the programs listed by Brooks-Gunn, Berlin and Fuligni²⁶ or by Yoshikawa²⁷). Aside from their specific content, the most effective programs were those that were the

most intensive and lasted the longest. Most of these programs focused on the cognitive stimulation of the children and on literacy or academic prerequisites. Few have included a component to equip parents to deal with their children's behavioural problems or to improve their own knowledge of and attitudes towards school, and few have examined the personal needs of the parents or attempted to improve the family's socio-economic status. Programs like the Child-Parent Centers set up under the Chicago Longitudinal Study^{20,28} are a noteworthy exception because of the variety of activities they make available to the children and the parents. However, even this model program places much less emphasis on social behaviours conducive to group learning (i.e., task-focusing, emotional self-regulation and social skills) than on academic prerequisites and language skills. Despite the recognized importance of the latter for the academic development of the children, Raver²⁹ stresses the importance of having a matrix of preschool emotional and behavioural skills in order to predict and prevent school difficulties. She also points to the importance of cultural and socio-economic factors.

Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Services

The ideas outlined above should serve as a starting point for programs to promote school success that could vary in intensity depending on the needs of the children, their families and their communities. Such programs can be carried out in the family as well as in various childcare settings.^{20,28,30} In fact, over half of all preschoolers are exposed to educational environments other than the family. Lastly, we must not overlook kindergarten and the first years of elementary school, although, strictly speaking, they fall outside the preschool framework. A number of promising prevention programs have been or are being conducted with children in kindergarten and early elementary school (the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group's FAST TRACK program;³¹ the Early Alliance program;³² the Early Risers program;³³ and the Montreal program³⁴). Action is urgently needed in the highest-risk communities, where one young person out of three fails to complete high school within the prescribed time period, and one out of five never finishes at all. Future initiatives must neither underestimate the importance of the preschool years nor ignore strategies that have been proven effective in increasing completion rates and reducing a whole range of adjustment problems in childhood and adolescence and even in adulthood.³⁵⁻³⁶ Nor should one jump to the conclusion that corrective action during the preschool period, no matter how intensive and appropriate, will be capable in all cases of creating all of the right conditions for the academic success and personal development of at-risk children. Sustained approaches which follow the children and their families through elementary and even secondary school like the one used in the Fast Track program) and strategic approaches that target the transition periods such as the one adopted by the promoters of the Early Alliance program deserve serious consideration and should be tested. These approaches would result in a sustained intervention that begins during pregnancy and occurs continuously or as required when the child is going through life changes (birth, commencement of daycare, etc.) during the preschool period. This would have the advantage of addressing various risk and protective factors whose relevance only becomes apparent after the preschool phase, and therefore of supporting any previous early intervention efforts.

Table 1

Title of program (Authors)	Overview
1- Project Abecedarian ³⁷	<p>Duration: 5 years (0 to 5 years) Description: Focussed on the development of language, cognitive skills and appropriate behaviours at daycare centre; parental involvement. Results: Positive effects on intellectual skills and academic achievement (fewer repeats) up to age 15.</p>
2- Project Perry Preschool ³⁸	<p>Duration: 30 to 60 weeks (3 or 4 years) Description: Centred on cognitive skills and spoken language at the day care centre; home visits. Results: Higher completion rates, less criminality, fewer pregnancies and fewer cases of economic dependence</p>
3- Even Start ³⁹	<p>Duration: 9 months (3–4 or 4–5 years) Description: Centred on cognitive learning and language; home visits, education of the parents. Results: Mixed short-term results.</p>
4- Untitled Project ⁴⁰	<p>Duration: One year (kindergarten) Description: Interactive reading in class and at home; meetings with the parents. Results: Improved performance in reading.</p>
5- Chicago Child-Parent Centers ^{28,41}	<p>Duration: One year (kindergarten) Centred on reading, writing and phonological awareness; workshops for the teachers and for parents. Results: Improved performance in reading.</p>
6- Untitled Project ⁴²	<p>Duration: 3 to 9 years Description: Cognitive and academic skills; involvement of parents and teachers. Results: Decrease in dropout rate.</p>
7- Early Head Start ⁴³	<p>Duration: 3 years (0–3 years) Description: Cognitive and emotional development of the children, help for parents. Positive but modest effects on the children's emotional self-regulation and behaviour problems; Results: Positive effects on the parents' educational practices.</p>
8- The Incredible Years ⁴⁴	<p>Duration: 12 weeks (3–5 years) Description: Centred on the educational strategies of the parents and teachers. Moderate positive effects on the children's disruptive behaviours and self-regulation; Results: Reduction in rates of school dropout.</p>

N.B.: Only experimental, randomized case-control studies are reported herein.

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