VOICES FROM THE FIELD -
School Readiness, Academic Success and School Completion from an Early Childhood Perspective: A Practitioner's View

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Service perspective

The findings of the CEECD papers[1-10] underline the multiplicity of factors that are associated with school readiness, academic achievement and school completion. While all of the authors[1-10] agree that early childhood experiences prior to school entry can play a major contributing role to children's school success, the reader is also struck by the numerous gaps in our research and knowledge about the interplay of variables during the early years.

Five key themes emerge as important to school success:
- The early development of child-specific skills such as language, emergent literacy, self-regulatory behaviour, positive interpersonal relationships and intrinsic motivation to learn;
- The impact of parenting style and parental interest/involvement in the educational process;
- The quality, intensity, duration and accessibility of formal early childhood programs;
- Broad socio-cultural and economic factors such as income, parental formal education levels, ethnicity, home language, family mobility and neighbourhood cohesion;
- The degree to which schools have developed pro-active, positive relationships with families and early childhood service-providers to create a community climate conducive to early learning and to facilitate the successful transition of young children into school.

To date, much of the school success research related to the early years has focused on the effectiveness of formal early childhood programs – specifically demonstration preschool and *Head Start* initiatives working with disadvantaged children in high-need neighbourhoods in the United States. *The Perry Preschool High Scope Program* and *the Carolina Abecedarian Preschool Program*, both child-focused, centre-based part-time programs, are frequently identified as having the best short- and long-term results.[2,6] The newer Chicago Child-Parent Centre approach, which combines a school-based preschool

program beginning at age three with family support programs that encourage parent involvement in the educational process, is also emerging as a positive model.[2,6]

Yet the lack of comparable, longitudinal research for other types of child-care settings leaves many questions unanswered. This is troubling, given that the majority of young children in Canada are now spending significant amounts of time in informal and formal full and part-time care settings while their parents are working or studying.

Smith[2] points to the importance of examining two broad aspects of early childhood program quality to support positive child outcomes:

1. Structural issues such as small group size, favourable child-staff ratios, well-trained staff and low staff turnover;

and

2. Process issues such as positive interactions among children and staff, language-enriched, developmentally appropriate programming, a climate of caring and respect, and attention to individual needs and learning styles within the group setting.

The research also suggests that the most effective early childhood programs usually have a parent involvement component that promotes parent engagement in the child's learning and encourages an interactive positive parenting style through role modelling, informal peer support and specific parent education activities.

Despite the acknowledged importance of parenting style to school success, there has been remarkably little research in this area. For example, we have no studies that help us to understand the links between healthy parent-child attachment and bonding during infancy and the implications for school success. Further exploration is also required regarding the importance of parental planning, support and advocacy during key early childhood transitions. Lastly, we need to have more information about the relative merits of home visiting/outreach family support models versus community-based group-oriented parent education approaches that include a formal child-minding component.

Another area of school success research that is sadly lacking is assessing the importance and benefits of early screening and timely early intervention services for children with developmental delays, mental health concerns or family risk factors. Too often, preventable conditions are not detected until time of school entry; at which point the interventions usually become more intensive, invasive, long-term and costly from both a human and financial perspective.

Finally, as noted by Rumberger,[5] parents and early childhood service-providers cannot be expected to take full responsibility for ensuring school success. Even after accounting for socio-cultural and economic differences between communities, it is important to recognize that schools, through their structure, student composition, teaching resources, instructional approach, interpersonal climate and attention to home/school relationships must intentionally plan for school success. This school responsibility also includes becoming a focal point in the local community, so that even prior to school entry,

families with young children already feel attached to and comfortable with their neighbourhood school and some of the school staff. In addition, schools must develop collaborative relationships with early childhood service-providers, encouraging the use of school facilities and engaging in broader public efforts to meet the needs of younger children and their families. New research from British Columbia on school readiness using the *Early Development Instrument*[11] is beginning to suggest that it may be this "community partnership/community capacity-building" approach to early childhood, which could help to explain some of the community differences in children's school readiness levels.

In conclusion, school success research is still very rudimentary and in the past has tended to focus narrowly on demonstration preschool approaches. As academics and practitioners, we now know from recent brain development research that the experiences of the first six years of life are extremely important and have lifelong implications for health, well-being and school achievement. These experiences are within the complex context of family and community. It is my hope that the dialogue begun under the auspices of the CEECD will help to spotlight areas for further research that can encourage informed planning and best practice among parents, service-providers, community partners, policy-makers and funders alike.

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