ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

[Archived] Commentary on Rimm-Kaufman, Cowan and Cowan, Dockett and Perry, and Kamerman

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Introduction

The papers reviewed for this commentary address the issue of young children's transition to school. School transition is situated within the broader topic of *school readiness* and examined in light of the contexts that support children's academic and social development. Children's success or failure in school is influenced by how they move between the systems that impact their development. Given that children's early functioning is a consistent predictor of later social and academic outcomes, it is critical to attend to movement between these settings as they have the potential to either support or hinder development.

Research and Conclusions

According to Rimm-Kaufman,[1] early childhood experiences directly contribute to school readiness. As children transition into kindergarten, their future academic success depends on

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their social and academic preparedness for learning. Yet, we know, from Kammerman's[2] work, that children enter kindergarten with a wide variety of skills and abilities that significantly contribute to their later school success or difficulties. Given the increasing focus on formal academic skills during the kindergarten year, and the linguistic, economic and cultural diversity of students, Rimm-Kaufman[1] notes that inquiry into what factors constitute and affect school readiness is an important area of research.

Recognizing that children experience multiple systems and settings that influence their development, and thus school readiness, leads us to conclude that the interactions between these systems is an important area of focus. Current research and interest taking a developmental/ecological approach focuses on the connections made between the multiple systems children experience.[3] Transition practices that enhance relational and informational linkages between systems during children's shift into kindergarten are one way to promote stability and support, which may facilitate early school adjustment.[4] In addition to anecdotal positive reviews from both parents and teachers,[5] empirical evidence now exists that links the use of transition practices with children's social, behavioural and academic adjustment to kindergarten.[6,7]

Considering the importance of transition practices on child outcomes, the remaining papers focus on interventions within systems that influence children's development, and how those systems support successful school transitions. For example, Cowan and Cowan[8] focused on parents' and families' roles in preparing a child, both cognitively and socially, for transition into a school setting. Their work found that particular relationships within the family system impact children's school readiness and may be amenable to intervention. The authors concluded that intervention programs focused on strengthening family systems could have positive impacts on children's transitions to school.

Moving from family systems to larger-scale interactions, Dockett and Perry[9] examined the social and cultural contexts of schools and communities and found that they can significantly impact children's school readiness and their later school engagement. Kamerman's[2] work highlights the role of quality preschool programs as a support for preparing children for kindergarten. Quality programs produce gains in children's development of language, social and behavioural skills, and these gains are more pronounced for disadvantaged children.

Within the systems approach to school transition and readiness, the linkages between the settings that serve critical roles in child development need to be examined further. Areas amenable to intervention include providing structural and social supports to children and

families through after-care and social networks; building relationships between and within families, schools and communities; and facilitating collaborations that help children and families navigate the transition to school. Intervention into these systems is particularly important given that transition practices appear to facilitate quicker adjustment to kindergarten, which then allows children to take better advantage of learning opportunities in the classroom.[6,7] These associations between transition practices and children's adjustment during kindergarten are of particular importance given that future academic and behavioural outcomes are associated with children's early competencies.[10,11,12,13,14]

Implications for Development and Policy

These articles serve as a starting point for understanding that multiple systems (family, community and school) are amenable to change that supports children's successful transition to school. The papers reviewed here further reinforce the United States' National Education Goal Panel's[15] emphasis on strengthening relationships between systems as key to successful school transitions. The panel identified relationships as useful tools for improving connections between home, community, pre-kindergarten and elementary school, which could result in enhanced competence for all children. Implications from the studies reviewed here, as well as others in the field, indicate potential benefits from a more formalized and systematic approach to creating and sustaining transition support plans that align spheres of influence. Children, especially those from poor families, appear to adjust better to kindergarten when exposed to well-aligned support systems. These findings are conducive to advancing a variety of questions regarding the most effective systems amenable to intervention that best support children's school readiness.

As pointed out by Rimm-Kaufman,[1] further work needs to be done on defining school readiness but, more importantly, in identifying the characteristics of the child and/or environment that contribute to school success. Cowan and Cowan[8] see increased focus on interventions that strengthen the family system, and in turn impact children's transitions to school and their future academic outcomes, as one area of attention. An additional area that is primed for research and intervention is the integration of school (Kamerman[2]) and community (Dockett & Perry[9]) influence in order to create cohesion between these systems. Investments in these types of transition practices that build coherence across early childhood settings through vertical and horizontal linkages[16,17] show promise as a means of supporting children's adjustment during early schooling.

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Most researchers and practitioners in the field of early childhood accept the complexity of school readiness arising from the multiple systems of influence on children's development. Few, however, are able to articulate an encompassing organizational change that will address how the spheres of influence can work together to more systematically support children's development. In a recent policy statement, Bogard and Takanishi[18] reflected on the disconnected worlds of pre-kindergarten and elementary schools and proposed better alignment of learning opportunities for children ages three to eight. Many states are currently attempting to work collaboratively across regulating agencies on early learning guidelines that systematically align expectations of children's development along a continuum in a range of domains. Despite these efforts, a recent review of state-level early education standards indicates considerable variability within the early childhood field in what are considered to be the most important learning objectives during these early years.[19] It is very clear that there is a real need to invest time and resources in further building cohesion between systems of influence on child development, school transitions, and school readiness. The field is ready for an integration of families, schools and communities, through interdisciplinary work, collaboration and communication; that then embraces a coherent and comprehensive view of child development and holds the well-being of the child as a central tenant.

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