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[Archived] School Readiness: Preparing Children for the Transition from Preschool to Grade School. Comments on Love and Raikes, Zill and Resnick, and Early

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Introduction

How can we help infants, toddlers and preschoolers get ready for the challenges of grade school and make satisfactory progress during the early years of formal schooling? Although interest in this question dates back more than 30 years to the inception of compensatory early childhood programs (e.g. Head Start), its importance has grown in recent years as accumulating evidence has revealed that children's performance during the primary school years (Kindergarten through Grade 3) has an important bearing on their later success in school and in life.[1] Consequently, understanding how young children are best prepared to enter and succeed in grade school has

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become a priority among parents, educators, legislators and researchers.

To a large extent, contemporary efforts to address this agenda have been guided by the concept of “school readiness.” As many researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers have defined it, school readiness implies that by the time children enter grade school (Kindergarten), they have achieved a level of development that makes it likely that they will successfully adapt to the challenges of formal schooling. Whether intended or not, this concept implies that an important objective for the early childhood years is to ensure that young children achieve a state of “readiness” before they enter grade school. In practice, however, this objective has proven difficult to achieve. Every year, large numbers of children have difficulty adapting to grade school, and these data make it clear that there is considerable variation in the extent to which young children are prepared for formal schooling. Most often, deviations from this implied norm are attributed to differences in children’s rearing conditions (e.g. poverty, violence in the community or home, inadequate or dysfunctional socialization), health (developmental delays, disabilities, injuries, chronic illness), inherited characteristics (e.g. ability, temperament, personality), and various combinations of these factors.

Each of the articles that accompany this commentary represents an attempt to identify, from extant lines of investigation, certain aspects of young children’s development and socialization that may be crucial to the promotion of school readiness (e.g. social, language, literacy development) and some of the processes that appear to promote specific forms of preparedness (e.g. infant and toddler programs, early childhood curricula, parenting practices, etc.). Because these investigators work from different theoretical perspectives and focus on different child attributes and socialization experiences, the evidence they review is diverse and speaks to a number of factors that may affect children’s success in grade school.

Research and Conclusions

Love and Raikes describe qualities of young children’s development that, according to the National Education Goals Panel, constitute “readiness” dimensions. They also review evidence that reflects on the effectiveness of early interventions (infant and toddler programs) as a strategy for promoting school readiness. Five dimensions were cited as important facets of readiness: children’s physical and motor development, social and emotional development, learning, language, and cognitive development. In addition to these dimensions, three supporting conditions were recognized: children’s participation in high quality preschool programs,

socialization by parents (as first teachers), and receipt of adequate nutrition and health care. These goals were accompanied by an analysis of the role that *early* intervention and demonstration programs, primarily those developed and tested with infants and toddlers, play in promoting the focal readiness dimensions. Findings were reviewed for four exemplary interventions: the Carolina Abecedarian Project (CAP), the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP), the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP), and the national evaluation of Early Head Start (EHS). Results from the CAP were used to illustrate the effectiveness of early program participation on children's cognitive development. Children assigned to this program, unlike controls, participated from the first months of life until age five, and manifested significant gains in cognitive development, starting as early as the toddler and preschool years. Similarly, results from the IHDP were presented as evidence of the effects of early intervention on children's intelligence. Data gathered on the CCDP were used to show that a comprehensive family service program could generate gains of a temporary nature on more than one criterion. This program yielded initial improvements in children's cognitive development as well as in certain supporting conditions, such as mother's child- rearing skills and parents' economic status. Unfortunately, these improvements had disappeared by the time children entered grade school. Of all the program effects that were reviewed, those from the EHS evaluation were among the most impressive because they implied that the intervention not only contributed to several aspects of young children's (two- and three-year olds) readiness, but also increased the quality of the conditions that support growth in readiness. Gains were found in children's cognitive, language and social development, as well as in parent-mediated literacy development and children's participation in high-quality child-care programs.

Zill and Resnick address a similar question: whether early educational experiences promote school readiness. However, in contrast to Love and Raikes, this article focuses on the potential benefits that older preschool children may derive from participation in early childhood education programs. Much of the evidence that is reviewed comes from experimental studies in which the objective was to follow children who attended different types of preschool programs (or who served as controls or comparison groups) over a period of years and compare their development on school-readiness criteria. Based on the available data, the authors suggest that preschoolers accrue the most favourable developmental consequences when they participate in high-quality intensive centre-based programs, and that theoretically-guided "model" programs tend to show stronger effects than do large-scale publicly-funded programs, especially for disadvantaged children. Although the construct of program quality is not well defined, it is implicated as a

modest contributor to several aspects of early development that may affect children's school readiness, including language and literacy proficiency, play skills, capacity to engage in positive peer- and teacher-child interactions, and achievement motivation.

In the final article of this series, Early encourages us to look beyond the infant, toddler and middle preschool years to consider readiness-related developments that occur in closer proximity to school entrance. Here, the focus is on the period of time during which children make the transition from preschool to grade school, and it is argued that numerous factors that operate during this interval (i.e. before, during and after the transition) may promote or impede children's school readiness. Among the findings considered are those obtained from surveys of transition-enhancing services and programs – practices based in schools or performed by teachers and parents that are intended to facilitate children's transition into grade school. Regrettably, what this review makes clear is that most children receive little in the way of formal assistance before they enter school, and that many of the services that are provided are perfunctory in nature and tend to be implemented belatedly, just before children enter kindergarten (e.g. inviting parents and children to pre-registration meeting, open houses, etc.). Services that are designed to prepare children for successful school transitions, especially those implemented well before children enter grade school, are rare and are seldom based on sound developmental principles or practices. Although evidence gathered from survey studies implies that many pragmatic hindrances prevent the implementation of such practices, many of these obstacles do not appear to be insurmountable. As Early notes, it is particularly important to devise pre-transition practices that encourage children to form and maintain relationships with persons who are in a position to foster readiness and provide support before, during and after the transition to school (e.g. teachers, friends, future classmates).

Implications for Development and Policy

Much of the information presented in these reviews is consistent with the premise that early educational experiences further children's development in directions that prepare them for the challenges of formal schooling. Extant data imply that full-time child care, especially when it is supplemented with social supports for children and parents, can be beneficial for very young children (infants and toddlers). Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that preschoolers who attend early childhood education programs are better prepared for school, especially if they have been participants in high-quality programs. Although not yet empirically tested, conceptual advances support the expectation that transition-enhancing practices and programs that are

implemented during the interval between preschool and kindergarten will enhance children's school readiness.

At the same time, however, the writers of these reviews acknowledge that extant theory and evidence is not sufficient to affirm the premise that early educational programs and practices promote children's development in ways that affect their school readiness. It remains unclear, for example, which types of early educational experience are more effective for promoting school readiness, and what aspects of school readiness these programs affect. Based on Love and Raikes' analysis of early intervention programs, it would appear that there is stronger empirical substantiation for some areas of growth in child development than others. Whereas gains in cognitive development are reported in more than one investigation, growths in other readiness-related attributes (e.g. language and social development) are not as well documented. Moreover, much remains to be learned about the longitudinal links between children's participation in early educational programs and their readiness for school. It is tempting to conclude that very early gains in cognitive development translate into scholastic readiness several years later as children enter school but, as Love and Raikes note, empirical corroboration of this linkage remains rare.

Moreover, if such linkages exist, then a crucial next step will be to probe the mechanisms or processes that might explain how early educational or child-care programs affect later readiness (e.g. what features of early educational or child-care programs foster child development in specific readiness domains?). Zill and Resnick see this investigative challenge as a pivotal objective for researchers who wish to understand how early childhood education programs help preschool children prepare for school. They suggest that investigators examine more closely the effects of specific program features on differing dimensions of children's school readiness and, toward this end, they articulate an investigative agenda in which variations in curricula (e.g. promotion of pre-academic skills vs. language enrichment and emergent literacy vs. social-emotional development, etc.) and instructional methods (e.g. didactic, play-oriented, discovery-learning activities, etc.) are systematically varied and documented. Implied within this objective is the need to understand which dimensions of school readiness can be altered by programmatic variations, and this goal intersects with recent efforts to define "domains of preparedness" or specify the types of characteristics, skills and abilities that children should possess before they enter grade school.[3] Clearly, these are important goals for further investigation, and findings from such studies will likely expand existing knowledge substantially.

From a policy perspective, it is clear that consensus about what constitutes school readiness in young children is lacking. This absence of construct specificity is exemplified by the plethora of definitions that appear in the articles that accompany this commentary, and by the fact that the meaning of this concept remains a matter of scientific and public debate. It has been shown, for example, that teachers, principals and others who are in a position to formulate and implement educational practice and policy (e.g. legislators) do not always agree on what exactly constitutes readiness for formal schooling. For example, results from one investigation[2] showed that, whereas teachers and principals considered children's ability to engage in meaningful interactions an important indicator of school readiness, legislators placed greater emphasis on children's preparedness to perform specific pre-academic tasks (e.g. knowing the alphabet, paying attention, writing with pencils). As has been argued elsewhere,[3] further attempts to conceptualize the construct of school readiness should also be informed by an empirical analysis of the predictors of early school performance, that is, by research on child and school attributes that are closely linked with indicators of early school competence or success.

The default definition for school readiness seems to derive from the assumption that *children* should be prepared or made ready to adapt to the demands of formal schooling. A common construal of this premise is that, because school readiness resides in the child, preschool educators and parents must inculcate certain forms of "preparedness" in children (e.g. academic, social, and emotional competencies) before they enter Kindergarten. In contrast, school readiness is rarely defined in a way that implies that *schools* must be "ready" for children or prepared to adapt the demands of classrooms and schools to differences in five-year-olds' preparedness, developmental levels or individual needs. As Early points out, "School readiness includes both children's academic and social skills as they enter school and 'ready schools,' meaning the school's preparedness to serve all children." Because few of the characteristics of "ready schools" have been empirically investigated, little is known about how school-sponsored transition or outreach practices affect children's school readiness and subsequent educational progress. Not only do the ideas stemming from this concept represent important policy considerations, but they also provide a promising conceptual foundation for future research.

Finally, as Early notes, children's relationships may play an important role during the transition to formal schooling. In general, policy-makers have not given this facet of child development as much consideration as other potential predictors of school readiness (e.g. cognitive development, language development, emergent literacy, etc.). In recent years, however, accruing evidence has

begun to corroborate the proposition that this and other aspects of children's social development are precursors of the interpersonal and psychological conditions (e.g. curiosity, interest, attention, motivation, support and security) that empower children to succeed in grade school. For example, findings from a number of studies suggest that young children's success at social school-entry tasks (e.g. making friends, becoming accepted by classmates, forming a close rather than conflict-ridden relationship with the teacher) has an important bearing on how much they value or "bond" with school, adopt the student role, initiate and constructively participate in classroom activities, and profit scholastically from their classroom experiences.[4,5,6,7,8,9] Moreover, it has also been shown that young children's social relationships and competence during the preschool years are significant predictors of their interpersonal adjustment after they enter school.[10] Because of this, the social and emotional context of early schooling and its relation to children's scholastic attainment have become a more prominent consideration in recent reviews of educational research.[1,6,8,9] Likewise, the social precursors of school readiness have begun to receive more attention in contemporary social policy statements. In one such report, Raver[11] argued that children's social and emotional development are important aspects of their readiness for school and their future learning and achievement. In particular, she recommended that elementary school curricula be expanded to include tasks that foster children's behavioural and emotional adjustment, and that school personnel regularly assess these aspects of children's development throughout the early grade-school years.

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