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[Archived] School Transition. Commentary on Ladd and Stipek

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School Transitions/School Readiness: An Outcome of Early Childhood Development. Commentary on Ladd

Introduction

The theoretical and empirical work of the *Pathways Project*, as outlined by Gary Ladd, has many strengths. The longitudinal design and careful attention to the measurement of multiple influences on child functioning within the context of the school environment create a strong methodological foundation for the Project's findings, enhancing confidence that these findings provide valid and useful information on school transition. Overall, the strength of the *Pathways Project* lies perhaps in its explicit focus on relationships and the holistic perspective on school success and child functioning within school that this focus entails. The Project clearly indicates that one or two indicators of adjustment alone cannot tell the whole story of a child's success or difficulty in school transition. This is a crucial point. By situating children within their contexts, the Project eschews *main effects* conclusions in favour of meaningful, theoretically driven examinations of child characteristics within classrooms and classroom effects on children in the

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presence of distinct child characteristics.

Research and Conclusions

The longitudinal perspective of the Project allows for examinations of antecedent–consequence linkages between the early aspects of adjustment and later success or difficulty in school. These linkages are vitally important when making inferences about particular child characteristics or configurations of characteristics. The longitudinal perspective also allows for some estimation regarding the stability of particular individual characteristics associated with risk for subsequent adjustment problems. For example, higher levels of internalizing or externalizing behaviours may predispose an individual to risk, but how stable are these behaviours over time? What characteristics in children, homes, classrooms, and schools are associated with stability or change? These are but a few of the important questions that have been or will be addressed by Ladd and his colleagues in their research. Most impressive in this research is the presence of both variable-oriented and person-oriented approaches in illustrating conclusions. In a variable-oriented approach, support for an additive child by environment model was found. That is, aggressive tendencies among children increased the risk for poor school adjustment in the presence of chronic peer rejection and adversity. In the presence of persistently supportive peer relations, however, the risk for poor school adjustment associated with aggressive tendencies among children was reduced. This finding was born out by a person-oriented analysis in which a number of variables characterizing relationship histories were used to categorize aggressive children as having persistently supportive or adversarial peer relations. Children with a net balance of variables in favour of support were found to more successfully adjust to school.

Although Ladd’s research is generally very strong, the theoretical basis for his focus on relationships and on social behaviour as important components of school adjustment remains limited. Moreover, while his approach to child functioning is valid and useful, it lacks a clear theoretical and empirical statement as to how relationships and social development are related to academic achievement within school. It is almost as if, in a reaction to more traditional cognitive approaches to school adjustment, aspects of attention, memory, and cognitive self-regulation have been left out of the picture. But surely the focus on relationships should encompass these cognitive skills, since school adjustment must be mediated to some extent through them.

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In sum, Ladd's foundational research provides a focus that is conducive to advancing a variety of questions about the interface between cognition and emotion in children's transition to school. Ladd's research remains firmly grounded at the psychological level of explanation while encouraging us to examine neurological and molecular analyses. It also embraces school and community influences as the social foundations of school adjustment intersect the cognitive aspects of engagement and achievement.[1] Indeed, the influence of early experience on subsequent school adjustment is likely to be critical. But the approach proposed by Ladd and his colleagues pays too little attention to the first 4–5 years of a child's life preceding school transition. Certainly, no one program of research can do it all. Ladd's work is no exception and remains to be informed by literature on early childhood experience and the wide variation in social and cognitive functioning that children bring to school.

School Entry Age. Commentary on Stipek

Introduction

In counterpoint to Ladd's explication of the Pathways Project, Stipek's review situates the discussion of school transition within a key question around which multiple issues may be addressed. At what age are children ready to enter school?

Research and Conclusions

In reviewing the relevant literature, Stipek makes clear that the current cross-sectional approaches to the relation between age at entry on one hand and school outcome on the other have been very limited in scope and have yielded little of substantive interest to inform our understanding of children's success or difficulty in the transition to school. If anything, the literature on age at entry has produced the very intriguing finding that school drives cognitive growth in particular areas. This result has considerable implications for understanding cognitive development and the relation of schooling to intelligence. However, a major limitation of the review (and perhaps of age at entry literature in general) is the absence of data regarding the effect that age at entry may have on children's social development. Given Ladd's clear demonstration of the relation between social processes and school transition, the effect that early entry into school may have on school transition through social developmental processes would seem to be very meaningful. Nevertheless, as is more likely the case (and as Stipek makes clear), age at entry is really a poor marker for variables relevant to the transition to school. As

noted by Stipek in her conclusion, the relevant questions about school transition concern the antecedents and determinants of skills and abilities that will foster the early adjustment process. The age at entry findings really have little to say about this important aspect of school transition.

Stipek's brief review of the age at entry literature makes the very useful point that we must look at the development of foundational thinking skills prior to school entry. However, the review limits its focus to the cognitive implications of the age at entry question. Certainly, being the youngest or oldest in an entering kindergarten class has implications for peer relations and for teacher expectations. Although these areas may not have been previously addressed in the age at entry literature, there are substantial bodies of literature on each that are relevant to the age at entry question and pertinent to the examination of the effect of age of entry on school achievement and adjustment.[2]

Future research should include a longitudinal perspective on the question along with further consideration of age at entry literature that takes into account the methodological strengths and weaknesses of individual studies. Such research would provide the basis for greater accuracy in assessing the limited utility of age at entry findings when formulating policy regarding children's adjustment to school.

Implications for Development and Policy Perspectives

The authors' discussions regarding the policy implications of the empirical work they have reviewed are very much to the point. Stipek is correct in her assessment that age at entry is simply not useful for formulating policy regarding school transition. However, whereas age at entry is not a useful measure, early introduction to "school" (ie, early educational daycare) is a clearly important predictor of subsequent school adjustment among children at risk for school failure. This point constitutes a primary policy implication that both Stipek and Ladd allude to in their articles.

Research on school transition and adjustment is increasingly clear regarding which aspects of child functioning are relevant to successful transitions. Social skills and relationships, along with key cognitive skills and abilities in early literacy, numeracy, and metacognitive ability, are the childhood characteristics upon which successful transitions are built. Policy should therefore be directed at enhancing preschool and early school experiences that build upon these empirically

validated aspects of functioning. Issues must be addressed regarding teacher training, service delivery for needy families and children in disadvantaged circumstances, and the establishment of consistent care environments that provide children with the social and cognitive stepping stones to enhance school transition. In addition, a system for ensuring the quality and utility of these services is needed.

Those interested in developing and evaluating the efficacy and effectiveness of programs that promote successful school transitions will be faced with the sizeable dilemma of implementation. In discussing the policy implications of his review, Ladd focuses on programs to be implemented during the early school transition years. He makes a number of excellent suggestions regarding ways in which environments to promote successful transitions might be structured. However, implicit in Ladd's proposals is the knowledge that services delivered only in preschool or only during the early school grades are likely not, in themselves, sufficient to enhance transitions for children at risk for school failure. Therefore, integrated preschool- and school-age services, enacted by agencies and service systems in many communities that may have limited interaction, are needed. Thus, perhaps the most pressing policy need and implication in the review is the need to coordinate pre- and post-preschool services to maximize success among children as they enter school.

References

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