[Archived] School Transitions/School Readiness: An Outcome of Early Childhood Development. Commentary on Ladd and Stipek

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Introduction

In current western culture, the five-to-seven age group is a culturally mandated point at which children make the transition from spending time exclusively in the family and perhaps in an intimate daycare setting to spending significant time in the larger, less intimate context of the public school.[1] This transition provides a challenge to the child and the family, in that new behaviours and skills are usually required in this new setting. Some children are able to make this transition well, behaving skilfully with peers, interacting well with teachers in these new social settings and appearing generally well adjusted, all of which predict success during the

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elementary school years.[2] Other children do not make the transition as easily. Ladd and Stipek discuss research findings relevant to understanding this transition. Ladd details research that he and his colleagues have conducted pertinent to understanding the processes that influence children's adjustment as they begin kindergarten at age five. Stipek summarizes research on the age of school entry as a practice that supports or hinders adjustment for children in the transition to kindergarten.

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

Research and Conclusions

In considering the conclusions that Ladd and Stipek reach, it is important to consider first the quality of the work. Conclusions reached from poorly conducted research necessarily should have less impact on practice and policy than conclusions reached from excellent research.

Ladd's work represents conceptual as well as methodological excellence. On the conceptual level, the consideration of multiple levels of factors that may "transact" in forming different pathways of school progress for different children moves our knowledge beyond the "main effect" models of development that conceptualize each influence as making an independent contribution. A limited main effect model characterizes much of the research on early school adjustment. The broader model that Ladd uses incorporates the holistic, contextual, ecological and transactional views of leading developmentalists such as Magnusson, Bronfenbrenner and Sameroff. It provides information about the processes and the interaction between factors that lead to children having school difficulties versus making a smooth adjustment to school.

Methodologically, Ladd's work also breaks new ground. The definition of success in school goes beyond the child's score on tests that measure academic progress and includes a broader conceptualization of the child's adjustment. Thus, a child is seen as successful in school when a positive attitude about school and learning is developed, supportive social ties with teachers and classmates are formed, comfortable and positive emotions are experienced by the child rather than anxiety or loneliness, the child participates and is positively engaged in the classroom, and the child achieves and progresses academically. This broader view of success in school recognizes the whole child and the importance of these relationship, emotional and cognitive attitudinal factors in addition to the child's academic progress.

I agree with the conclusions Ladd reaches, but find it useful to discuss them in light of the concept of maintenance of behaviour or risk. In understanding the pathways through which children have difficulty in school, it appears that early aggressive or anxious-withdrawn behavioural dispositions make it more likely that children will have difficulty in forming positive peer relationships in school. Greater understanding of difficulties in school adjustment is achieved by considering these factors together, in that it is when more difficult behavioural dispositions lead to chronic difficulties with peers that children show significant increases in psychological and school maladjustment across the early school grades. When the school environment does not maintain the early risk (the child forms positive peer relationships despite the early aggressive or anxious-withdrawn behavioural dispositions), children do not show long-term adjustment difficulties. This notion of maintenance of problems by the school context may be useful as schools tend to see the child and the family as responsible for the child's behaviour and success, but do not consider how the school context may serve to either maintain or fail to maintain early risk.

Implications

This leads directly to the implications for policy and service. Ladd's work has important implications for the creation of school contexts that either maintain or fail to maintain early problematic behavioural dispositions and behaviour patterns in children. Ladd's recommendations addressing these problems are sensible, but focus only on improving dyadic relationships between children. It is very likely that the overall context and atmosphere of the classroom sets the tone for the kind of interactions that occur between children. Classrooms that focus on mutual respect and support may be likely to create the kinds of contexts where victimization and rejection of individual children is less likely. The quality of whole classroom settings should be considered in addition to efforts to improve the relationships between pairs of children.

School Entry Age. Commentary on Stipek

Research and Conclusions

Turning to Stipek's review, findings from a number of carefully executed studies regarding age of child on entry into school are considered. The review suggests that age of entry into school as a single variable does not explain much about differences in children's achievement in school.

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Stipek suggests that research regarding age of entry does not favour either earlier or later school entry as policy. This is another demonstration of the weakness of single-cause explanations for school adjustment. It seems apparent from this research that young children benefit from the school context and make academic gains despite their age of entry. Stipek contends that the emphasis should be placed instead on constructing classroom contexts that maximally support the development of both academic and social skills in children with an understanding that children of all ages are “ready to learn.” This recommendation is consistent with Ladd’s work suggesting that children’s progress in both social and academic realms is important for their adjustment to school, and thus schools must consider the appropriateness of their classrooms for children’s social and academic progress. These two are intimately tied in development, as demonstrated by Ladd’s work.

Implications

Two key implications arise from this work. First, we must more broadly construe the “success” of children in the classroom. Because aspects of development are intimately bound together in the “whole child,” understanding aspects of the child’s social, emotional, attitudinal and academic adjustment is critical. Ladd’s work demonstrates the power of social relationships in thrusting children with early difficulties on different paths, paths associated with children becoming involved and attached to the school environment versus paths that maintain behavioural difficulties and alienation from the school enterprise. The narrow focus on children’s academic skills misses the important progress children must make in adjusting to the classroom. Second, the classroom context is important in either maintaining early risk or thwarting it. Little attention is paid to the quality of classroom environments. Teachers are left to construct their environment as they see fit. Classroom environments must be constructed to meet the needs of the children in the classroom.

References

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