ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Services and Programs that Influence Young Children's School Transitions

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Introduction and Subject

Legislators, policy-makers and educators are increasingly focused on school readiness as a key to improving school outcomes for all children. 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. This emphasis on ready schools naturally focuses attention on the services and programs implemented by schools or teachers that influence young children's school transitions. Love, Logue, Trudeau and Thayer[1] argue that key ingredients to a successful transition are "activities and events (over and above the preschool and school programs) that are designed to overcome the discontinuities that may disrupt children's learning and development" (p. 9). Although high-quality experiences prior to the beginning of school and a high-quality elementary education program are critical to child success, some attention must also be given to the discontinuities between settings.

Research Context

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Ready schools, according to Pianta, Cox, Taylor and Early[2], have three characteristics: 1) they reach out, linking families, preschool settings and communities with schools; 2) they reach backward in time, making connections before the first day of school; and 3) they reach with appropriate intensity. Based on this theoretical approach, a rapport should be established among the child, the kindergarten teacher, the pre-kindergarten teacher, peers and the parent *before* the child enters kindergarten. Establishing this positive system of relationships among these social contexts is critical for successful transitions.[3,4] Relationships serve as resources for children as they enter school by allowing for clear communication, providing a sense of familiarity during the transition and facilitating social competencies.

Problems and Key Research Questions

The key research questions in the area of school transitions fall into three main categories: 1) what types of services and programs are most effective for aiding children as they make this transition? 2) what types of services and programs are currently in use? and 3) how can more effective services and programs become the norm? While there is a stronger research base from which to address the second and third key research issues, we have more recent work that addresses the first key research issue.

Research Results

Previous research provided information about what practices teachers use to improve school transitions, obstacles teachers face in implementing more effective practices and possible points of intervention for increasing the use of more effective practices. Pianta et al., using a comprehensive survey representative of U.S. kindergarten teachers, found that whereas almost all teachers reported some practices aimed at facilitating children's transitions into kindergarten, practices that would be most effective, according to the theoretical base – those that reach out, backward in time and with appropriate intensity – are relatively rare. Group-oriented practices occurring after the beginning of the school year (e.g., open houses) were the most common, while practices that involve one-to-one contact with children and families and those occurring prior to the first day of school were rare. Additionally, Pianta et al. found that in urban schools and in areas with more poverty and/or a higher concentration of minority students, individualized practices prior to the beginning of the school year were even less prevalent.

In the last two decades, the field has focused on the link between transition practices and children's experiences and outcomes in kindergarten and beyond. Using a nationally representative sample of kindergarten children in the United States, Cook and Coley[5] found that the number and type of transition practices related to children's functioning during the kindergarten year. Most teachers in this sample reported providing information to parents, offering parent orientations, or having children and parents visit their classrooms. Similar to Pianta et al.'s findings, few teachers engaged in one-on-one contact with children or their families. The overall number of transition practices teachers engaged in was positively linked to greater prosocial skills in children, while providing parent orientations was related to children's increased math and reading skills.

Several obstacles to the use of more effective transition practices have been reported. The most common barriers cited by teachers to implementing additional transition practices were the strain of large class sizes, class lists that are generated too late, practices involving summer work that is not supported by salary, lack of a transition plan in the district, and challenges connecting kindergarten teachers with early childhood educators[6,7] When teachers are faced with these obstacles, Early et al. found that optimal transition practices, particularly those that occur before school begins, are challenging to implement. Transition activities before the beginning of the school year require more preparation on the part of the teacher and school (e.g., class lists must be generated, children's and families' phone numbers/addresses must be known) and require either additional funds for teacher pay or unpaid time donated by teachers. Similarly, practices involving individualized interaction with a child or family require more time and planning than practices involving the entire class simultaneously. This is congruent with the finding that teachers with large class sizes were less likely to use transition practices before school began, probably because of the burden associated with large class sizes. Lastly, communication and coordination with preschool settings (a practice that would sustain on-going relationships and lessen discontinuities) are challenging because they require knowledge of the incoming class and their preschool settings, time and willingness on the part of the preschool programs, and coordination with many different programs.

Strikingly, Early and colleagues found the largest between-group differences in use of transition practices were between teachers who had and had not received training in transitions. Teachers with such training were more likely to use all types of transition practices, apparently seeing some value in approaching transitions from a variety of angles. They started before the

beginning of the school year, creating a longer transition period. They made efforts to use individualized practices, as well as group-oriented events. They involved the child's preschool setting – using the information provided by that setting and coordinating curricula and goals with that setting. Few teachers have such training, but these data indicate that it may be valuable in encouraging more comprehensive transition practices.

Conclusions

How children adapt to their earliest school experiences has long-term implications for cognitive and social development and for dropping out of high school.[8,9,10,11] With this in mind, attention is appropriately focused on optimizing children's transitions to school.

Optimal transitions to school are best supported by practices that are individualized and engage the child, family and preschool setting prior to the first day of school. Practices that establish and foster relationships among important individuals in the child's life, such as providing several opportunities for families to connect with kindergarten teachers and classrooms, as well as connecting with parents specifically, are likely to reap the most benefit for the child.

Unfortunately, current research on the status of school transition practices shows that these optimal transition strategies are not widely practiced. High-intensity practices are the most time-consuming and least likely to be used by early elementary teachers. Administrative and structural barriers, such as low teacher pay, large class sizes and poor district coordination, suggest that schools may not be "ready" for kindergarteners. Encouragingly, teachers who have training in transitions are more likely to use all types of transition.

Implications

Current research points to several avenues for improving transitions for young children. First, schools need to focus on systematic transition planning for children. Plans need to be coordinated, flexible, individualized and pay particular attention to helping children and families form relationships with schools and peers.

Second, schools and communities need to focus on issues of timing to ensure that the transition process begins well before the first day of school. This ensures that there is sufficient time for key relationships to form and that there is continuity between the home or preschool environments and the school. System-level changes, such as paying for teachers to work during

the summer, generating class lists early, smaller class sizes and holding events at school prior to the first day of class, can help to create a transition process rather than a transition event.

Last, there is evidence that teacher training in transition practices leads to increased use of transition practices of all types. Thus, providing pre-service and in-service training in this area may help teachers create plans for children and families that aid in helping children succeed during this transition.

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