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Links between Early Childhood Development and School Completion: Comments on Vitaro, Smith, and Hymel and Ford

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Introduction

The three texts examined here present highly convergent and complementary syntheses. Shelly Hymel and Laurie Ford focus primarily on showing how preschool children's socioaffective skills determine the quality of their school experience. While the authors briefly recognize the importance of other aspects of development (biological, cognitive, cultural, socioeconomic and family environment), they chiefly advance scientific arguments that justify the need to learn more about the precursors of early childhood socioaffective development.

Frank Vitaro[a] places the onus on the negative impact that behaviour (aggressiveness) and self-control problems have on children's school experience, due to the close association between

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such problems and difficulties such as language disorders and attention deficit. He also mentions the influence of children's family and socioeconomic environment in this regard. The author then provides a brief overview of preschool interventions that have helped children better adjust to school. He reminds readers that duration and intensity are important characteristics of effective interventions. Vitaro supports the statements of Hymel and Ford by stressing the importance of promoting the early development of social and emotional skills.

Anne Smith summarizes what we know about the impact and effectiveness of preschool education programs (*Early Childhood Education)*. She also mentions the importance of intervention dosage (intensity and duration), and goes on to specify that not all preschool education programs offer the same quality of services. She draws attention to studies showing that the quality of those educational environments has as much to do with structural factors (size of the group, educator-children ratio, educator skills) as with educational processes (quality of educator-child relationships, relationship attitudes, child-centred educational processes, etc.).

Recent Research Results and Conclusions

There is no doubt that the quality of social and emotional development plays a central role in school experience. The quality of learning is intimately linked to the quality of students' social integration.[1,2] The authors' focus on the importance of early childhood social and emotional development is surely justified, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. It is worth adding, however, that recent longitudinal studies show that, while setbacks at the beginning of the schooling process (failure, retention) are powerful predictors of school dropout during adolescence, the same applies to family and socioeconomic factors.[3-5] Therefore, there is no cause yet to claim the primacy of socioaffective risk factors over other social factors, at least during the preschool years.

Furthermore, a point of view that is fairly absent from the proposed syntheses is that of school as an educational environment in its own right. Socioaffective and behavioural risks early in life generate school difficulties in the context of interaction with an educational environment whose very composition, space-time organization, educational practices, etc. have an impact on the manifestation of school achievement.[6-8]

Moreover, stating that a lack of social and emotional skills during the preschool years increases the risk of a negative school experience does not necessarily mean that the opposite argument

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applies. Not all of the students who experience problems at school show socioaffective risk factors in early childhood. A number of researchers have addressed the psychosocial and schooling heterogeneity of adolescents who drop out of school.[9-11] While certain types of dropouts probably manifest difficulties from the time they enter kindergarten, this does not seem to be the case for many of them. An approach that focuses on identifying various paths of development would no doubt help delve deeper into the links between preschool social and emotional development, and subsequent adjustment to school.[12] In our opinion, it is also worthwhile to insist further on the issue of gender differences. Boys are more likely to have problems at school: they are more prone to failure, grade retention, dropping out, etc.[13] Despite a plethora of explanatory hypotheses, ranging from biological determinism to feminist analyses, we must acknowledge that there is little empirical knowledge on the subject. The differential impact of early childhood social and emotional skills on the school experience of boys and girls needs to be documented better.

Implications for Policy and Services

It is worth recalling and reinforcing several of the authors' recommendations:

1. It is of the utmost importance to increase the public's access to *quality* preschool education programs, in other words, programs whose content and application is modeled on the characteristics of tried and tested programs. However, it is not enough to simply provide additional financial and material resources. It is also essential to improve the quality of educator training with regard to specific knowledge and know-how. University-level training is better suited to the complexity of the operations required to set up specialized education programs.
2. Services must be adapted to communities' cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, particularly those of the more underprivileged areas, which are also the areas that are most likely to benefit from preschool interventions.[14] A comprehensive approach that incorporates health and social services, with coordination and cooperation among various community partners is essential to meeting this challenge.[15,16]
3. It would nevertheless be a mistake to focus solely on preschool interventions. Governments must implement ongoing action strategies that are tailored to children's various stages of development and socialization contexts. Although early intervention is beneficial, and its cost-benefit analysis justifies the place it should occupy, it is not a panacea.[14] The adverse

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effects of many social and emotional problem determinants will remain despite early intervention (family, poverty, neighbourhood life, peers, stressful life events, etc.). Some children and families' degree of risk is such that support over several years or at different stages of social development is required. That is why we find it extremely important to think about the continuity of services between the preschool and school periods (elementary and high school).

4. Integrating a socialization mandate into the mission of education ministers (e.g., in Quebec and British Colombia) is certainly a step in the right direction. Schools must implement the most effective educational practices, not only to develop school learning and skills, but also to develop social and behaviour management skills.[8,17] Unfortunately, university training seems lacking in this respect. Once again, we believe that universities must improve or fine-tune their training programs so that future teachers and school principals will be better prepared to fulfill their socialization mandate.
5. However, it is impossible for schools to shoulder alone the responsibility for providing all prevention, support or remedial services when it comes to social adjustment. They must in turn be able to count on the resources, support and expertise of various partners in their community.[15] Certain organizational models seem to facilitate the integration and coordination of services, particularly in underprivileged areas (e.g., *Full Service Schools*; see also references 18, 19 and 20). This being said, it is up to the different levels of government to promote and support active participation by various school and community partners in such cross-sector partnerships.

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Note:

[a] Comments on original paper published by Frank Vitaro in 2003. To have access to this article, contact us at cedje-ceecd@umontreal.ca.

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