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The Links between Preschool Programs and School Completion Comments on Hauser-Cram, McDonald Connor and Morrison, and Ou and Reynolds

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Comments on:

1. Services or Programs that Influence Young Children's Academic Success and School Completion, Carol McDonald Connor and Frederick J. Morrison
2. Services or Programs that Influence Young Children (0-5) and Their School Completion/Academic Achievement, Penny Hauser-Cram
3. Preschool Education and School Completion, Suh-Ruu Ou and Arthur J. Reynolds

Introduction

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The papers by Connor and Morrison, Hauser-Cram, and Ou and Reynolds provide a clear and comprehensive overview of research and related issues relevant to preschool education and school readiness. As noted by these authors, the topic of early childhood education should be of utmost interest to educators and policy-makers alike; increasingly, evidence supports conclusions that some programs can promote short-term gains in a number of important cognitive and social domains, as well as academic attainment and school completion many years later. Moreover, these programs appear to be especially beneficial for at-risk children.

Research and Conclusions

Across the three papers, there is general consensus concerning what is known about early child-care and education programs and the challenges that implementation and evaluation of these programs present. Indeed, many scholars agree that the most pronounced and consistent effects of early childhood programs are on children's language and literacy skills, with some evaluations also documenting positive social and affective outcomes; other long-term effects of some model programs have included increased rates of school completion.[1,2,3] It is also clear from the literature that positive long-term effects for children tend to be greatest when they attend model programs that begin services at birth and extend into the elementary-school years, that integrate efforts to support positive parenting with school-based instruction and that employ highly skilled teachers. Connor and Morrison, Hauser-Cram, and Ou and Reynolds also appear to agree that in order to make significant progress toward greater understanding of these findings, researchers must increase efforts to define and interpret what is meant by quality and long-term success, implement and evaluate model programs on a larger scale and utilize theoretical models to identify the mechanisms and multiple factors that can explain why certain programs appear to have significant, positive effects on children's lives.

These interpretations of the extant literature are thoughtful and well grounded in the literature. Therefore, in response to these papers, I would like to expand on several points and offer some additional perspectives on how to approach some of these challenges. A central issue raised in these papers relates to the multiple definitions of program quality and success that appear in the literature. Connor and Morrison argue that clearly articulated goals for early childhood programs are often lacking. Ou and Reynolds extend this argument by suggesting that, although short-term social and cognitive gains have been cited as meaningful outcomes that are influenced by quality programs, the ultimate and most important goal of early childhood programs should be educational attainment.

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Historically, the explicit target of formal educational programs has been to develop intellectual and academic skills that contribute to a well-functioning citizenry. However, policy-makers, as well as parents and educators, have also acknowledged the important contributions of schooling to the development of children's social and self-regulatory skills, including the development of positive interpersonal relationships, social perspective-taking skills, motivation to achieve valued social and academic outcomes and positive educational aspirations.[4] This tradition of promoting multiple goals for school children underscores the notion that being a successful student and ultimately a competent citizen requires the development of many skills. Therefore, a focus on the accomplishment of distal goals such as educational attainment requires concomitant attention to goals more proximal to early childhood development, such as social and self-regulatory functioning and social adjustment to school. In turn, achieving these developmental milestones should contribute in positive ways to later academic accomplishments and attainments. In fact, much research on elementary-level and secondary-level students documents significant correlations between social competencies and positive academic outcomes.[5]

In line with this suggestion, I agree wholeheartedly with Ou and Reynolds' call for further development and use of theoretical models to guide work in this area. Without conceptual frameworks to guide systematic hypothesis testing, it is not possible to make any clear identification of the underlying causal mechanisms that can inform practitioners about how and why specific practices work better than others. Towards this end, I would propose that researchers make better use of what we know about effective parenting to identify components of model programs. As noted in each paper, parenting factors explain a significant and meaningful proportion of the variance in school success over and above that explained by program effects. In light of these findings, it is essential that programs provide services to parents that can enhance parenting skills, parent-child communication strategies and parental efficacy for child-rearing and for interacting with educational institutions. These and other positive aspects of parenting can only serve to enhance the overall effects of more child-centred interventions at school.

In addition, however, it is reasonable to ask a slightly different question: what do we know about effective parenting that can be incorporated into and thus improve early childhood programs? There is widespread recognition that specific parenting practices are central to the development of childhood competencies.[6,7] Parents who provide children with appropriate levels of control by consistently enforcing rules and providing structure for children's activities; who communicate

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expectations to perform up to one's potential as well as to practice age-appropriate levels of self-reliance and self-control; who engage in democratic communication styles that solicit children's opinions and feelings; and who express warmth and approval have children who thrive socially as well as cognitively.[8] In addition, effective parents tend to be those who model appropriate values and skills [9] and who scaffold their children to be more self-reliant learners. [10]

Although it is critical for parents to be taught these skills, it is reasonable to assume that teachers can also be taught how to employ these strategies and that their use will increase the likelihood that their students will thrive academically and socially in the classroom.[11] In fact, in studies of elementary school-aged children, teacher provisions of structure, guidance and autonomy have been related to a range of positive motivational as well as academic outcomes.[12,13] Moreover, young children's adjustment to school has been related to teacher-student relationships characterized by warmth, absence of conflict and open communication.[14] Taking these findings one step further, it is likely that preschool teachers who interact with children in a manner consistent with “best practices” of parents will also significantly increase these children’s chances of developing a positive attitude toward schooling as well as valuable social and academic skills.

Implications

Connor and Morrison, Hauser-Cram, and Ou and Reynolds provide a set of recommendations for improving our understanding of the effects of early childhood programs. Support for longitudinal and large-scale studies, clarification of program goals, theory development and greater focus on family functioning are laudable objectives for the field to pursue. In addition, I would argue that program goals should be multi-faceted, targeting developmentally appropriate skills of young children that will facilitate the achievement of more long-term goals into adulthood. Moreover, program developers must utilize conceptual models that identify multiple outcomes that can be linked to the achievement of more distal educational outcomes. In this regard, there is much to be learned from research on what parents can do to promote the development of cognitive, social and affective competencies in their children. Implementing these practices into early childhood programs should contribute to a basic understanding of how and why some early childhood teachers promote positive outcomes in children while others do not.

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