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School readiness: Research on children's transition to schooling

Children's transition to formal schooling generally occurs between the ages of 4 to 7, and particularly, at age 5 in the United States when children move from preschool to kindergarten, which is the start of elementary school. This transition from either a home or preschool environment carries a great deal of importance. It represents a personal, cultural, and academic shift for the child and the family. Children's ability to make this transition successfully, or their school readiness, can be understood and determined in different ways. Further, the perspective one takes on a child's readiness affects the programs and interventions one undertakes to help with that transition.

Why now – a critical period?

When children move into a kindergarten classroom, they begin "formal instruction" which has been defined as "instruction that has the specific intent of raising the child's skill level" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This intentional teaching and learning environment comes at a time that has traditionally been marked, in many cultures, as the time for children to become students. Entwistle and Alexander (1998) argue that it is indeed a "critical period." While the idea of critical periods is commonly referenced when discussing language acquisition or imprinting in young fowl, Entwistle and Alexander argue that the principles also apply to the transition to schooling; that is, the nature of the stimulation from the environment matches the internal potential of the child in a way that can yield unusually high rewards for academic and social development. For example, while children undergo immense changes in their cognitive development and understanding of conservation and number, they also begin to have formal instruction in math and logic resulting in their learning very abstract concepts. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta refer to this transition period as "sensitive" rather than

"critical" because the child is "open to new influences" but the results are not as hard-wired as is implied by the term "critical period" and certainly significant development related to schooling may occur outside of this time period. Thus, as discussed by Haith and Sameroff (1996), this age period can be seen as *special* because of the combination of changes which occur both within the child and in the environment; however, it is not necessarily *unique* because there are many periods in development where rapid and interesting change occurs.

Implications of the Transition

The transition to schooling also resembles a critical, or rather, a sensitive, period because of the long-term correlates of the outcome of this transition and later school success. This distal continuity, or effects of earlier experiences on later functioning, seems to be especially strong for school achievement. For example, third grade reading achievement test scores were found to be the most significant predictor of adult status (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998). Therefore, some element of schooling does become engrained at a young age and optimization at that time might have disproportionate effects on later school achievement (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). One source of this continuity may be that schooling is cumulative in that the material builds on itself; that is, not learning to read as a third grader will certainly have an effect on your later school achievement. However, schooling is cumulative not only because the instructional material builds on itself but also because children's performance is tracked through their school records and every new teacher that they have already has some indication of their past performance, thus dooming low-performing students to a "self-fulfilling prophecy" of low achievement (Entwistle & Alexander).

The Demands of Schooling

There are many aspects of the school environment that will be different for children who are entering kindergarten or first grade and have not experienced "school" before. While those children who have attended preschool may be accustomed to some of these aspects, school is also a marked shift from the preschool environment. Children must become more independent from their families as they enter the elementary school years in several ways, both physically and emotionally (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998). They may learn how to find their way to and from school or how to take the bus to school, and they must be able to be away from home for the length of the school day. Further they must learn to manage their frustration and stress without the help of a parent and in doing so develop a sense of "self" (NICHD, 2004).

Children who have attended preschool may already have some sense of independence; however, the school is also a change from preschool because of its classroom environment. The intentional educational nature of the classroom makes itself known in its structure, teacher-student ratio, evaluation and competition. Children must become accustomed to a school day filled with structured activity including time for different subjects, lunch, recess, and bathroom breaks rather than going through their daily activities as they please (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998). While preschool is often focused on social development and small group play, children in kindergarten classrooms are more often addressed in large groups and focus on academic activities (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2000). Both the structured academic goals of the classroom and the higher teacher-student ratio result in less individual emotional support for the children.

In addition to the increased independence and decreased social support of school classrooms, children are introduced to the competitive nature of academics. Entwistle and Alexander (1998) discuss this change in terms of the "basis of rewards" or the way that children must perform in order to earn praise (p. 355). They argue that before the transition to school, children's success was compared to their previous accomplishment and so they were almost always praised for their ability; in contrast, a school environment forces comparison and competition between peers for the praise of the teacher. Thus, the realization that "success is no longer guaranteed" can be very difficult for children (p. 355). They come to understand that they are being judged against an explicit norm standard or even a relative standard with their peers and that the evaluation has implications.

The Notion of Readiness

The definition of school readiness has been questioned in terms of what construct it refers to. The term school readiness implies a certain state that must be achieved by a child before they can move on to school. Meisels (1996) discusses the term and provides a distinction between "readiness for learning" and "readiness for school." Readiness for learning refers to "the child's status prior to encountering new information or more advanced skills;" while, readiness for school refers to "specific skills or experiences that the dominant culture values as the precursors to successful school experience" (p. 408). Carlton (1999) argues that the term "school readiness" combines both readiness to learn and readiness for school and means "a quality that renders the child able to participate successfully in a regular public school curriculum" (p. 338). The definition of readiness for school that has been provided recalls the "hidden curriculum" of schooling, or the

socialization processes which go hand in hand with the explicit cognitive material that children must learn (Paris & Cunningham, 1996).

Children's experiences before the start of school can play an important role in their school readiness. Preschool serves to prepare children in several ways, according to various philosophies of education. Paris and Cunningham (1996) discuss three theoretical foundations: maturational-socialization, cultural transmission and cognitive developmental. The maturational-socialization view simply posits that education can provide positive stimulation and that children will reach their potential on their own. The cultural transmission view is more behavioristic and posits that preschool is an environment in which children can be socialized as "responsible citizens" (p. 124). Finally, the cognitive developmental view takes into account theories of change and accommodation in children's thinking by Piaget and Vygotsky and offers children stimulation that matches or goes slightly beyond their ability in order to foster growth. These three perspectives influence many early childhood environments and serve to prepare children for school in different ways.

The assessment of school readiness is an area of theoretical debate; however, it has great practical importance. While children may enter preschool at any point in their early childhood, entrance into school is state-mandated and follows different restrictions across the country. Most eligibility requirements are enforced according to age and have birthdate cutoffs for each entering class. Paris and Cunningham (1996) discuss the dilemma that this practice causes in the ability discrepancy of older children within the year and younger children. As a result, schools have been making cutoff dates earlier in the year and the incoming classes have been that much older. The problem between older

and younger children in the same grade remains, however. The alternative to entrance eligibility by age is to assess each child's ability or achievement in either social behavior skills or in particular subject areas such as math, reading and writing. Here, the opposite problem arises to eligibility by age in that ability is subjective according to the measurement used. Whether readiness assessment is used varies by state and even within states and therefore has not been subjected to any rigorous test of validity.

Social Adjustment in the Transition to Schooling

Children's social adjustment during the transition to schooling is certainly part of the equation that results in a successful transition. In fact, the readiness for school component of school readiness that was discussed has more to do with how children behave in school and what attitude they bring to the classroom than it does with academics. Some indications of positive social adjustment are good emotion regulation, absence of behavior problems, skill in relating to peers, and establishing a good relationship with the teacher (NICHD, 2004). Children with these behaviors are more likely to be attached to school and to make academic progress. Meisels (1996) discusses the assessment of children's social interaction on school readiness tests. These measures include items which look at whether children respond appropriately to questions such as "how are you," respond correctly to questions such as "how old are you," take social cues and sit down, and take an interest in what the teacher is showing them (p. 410). However, these behaviors, while they have important implications for entrance to school, are scored subjectively on these tests. Additionally, they do not necessarily appear in all children in the same way regardless of race, ethnicity, and class differences.

Children's social adjustment during the transition to school does not occur in a vacuum; in fact, it can be greatly affected by the many different contexts or ecologies that children experience. With respect to race and ethnicity, school readiness tests, such as the one discussed above, do not yield similar results across ethnicities and races (Meisels, 1996). Children who enter kindergarten also often experience more diverse populations that what they were used to in preschool (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This can be detrimental to the child's academic and social adjustment, particularly for minority-group children. Majority-status teachers may have lower expectations for minority-status children and may in fact fulfill their expectations by assigning lower grades; this effect of "social distance" may occur regardless of a student's potential according to standardized tests (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998).

The effects of race and ethnicity on a child's school adjustment demonstrate that it is not an entirely internal process and can be affected by many levels of the child's environment, including at the community and culture levels with regard to racial biases. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (2004) has looked at another context of the child's environment, parents' beliefs and behavior as predictors of children's social adjustment in the transition to school. Parents' beliefs about children may affect children's social adjustment during the transition to school in that more child-centered beliefs are likely to support the development of autonomy or independence, an important skill in the early school years. The study goes further to include as factors not only those parent beliefs and behaviors that are directed toward their child, but also the marital emotional support that exists between parents. Children's social adjustment was measured through teacher report of

cooperation, assertion and self-control. The results showed that mother's child-centered beliefs were significant predictors of lower externalizing scores, or acting out behavior, and higher social skills scores. Interestingly, fathers' reports of higher marital intimacy were associated with better social skills and lower levels of conflict with the teacher which suggests the complex interactions that are affecting child school outcomes in the family context.

In addition to the role that teachers and parents play in social adjustment, children are developing a new and very important set of relationships – those with their peers. Barth and Parke (1996) include peers as an important dimension for school adjustment because peer acceptance, peer social skills, and a child's feeling toward his classmates are predictors for short and long-term school adjustment. As with teacher expectations, peer relationships will often follow children throughout their school career. Early maladjustment may seal the child's fate in academic achievement and in peer social relationships.

Clearly social adjustment during the transition to schooling has many components, including those that the child brings as well as those that result from the interaction of the child's characteristics and the environmental contexts. Successful school adjustment is another term like school readiness which is used a great deal in social development and schooling literature but is not entirely transparent in its meaning. Ladd (1996) proposes a more complete construct of school social adjustment to include children's perceptions and feelings about the school environment as well as their explicit behaviors. Ladd defines school adjustment as "the degree to which children become interested, engaged, comfortable, and successful in the school environment" therefore

including the combination of liking school and doing well in the concept of school adjustment (p. 371).

Two perspectives – Maturational vs. Ecological

Thus far, two driving perspectives on children's school readiness and school adjustment have emerged. The traditional perspective of school readiness has been a maturational paradigm, where children are deemed ready for school at a certain age due to their maturational status. This perspective stems from a nativist view of development where biologically timed stages must occur before a child is ready to learn. Surprisingly, many teachers endorse this perspective and report that there is little that parents or teachers can do to promote learning until the child is "ready" (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). This perspective would fit well with aged-based school entrance eligibility if all children matured at the same rate. Since they do not, many proponents of the maturational perspective endorse the use of school readiness tests to determine if a child is ready or not.

However, recent discussions of this paradigm reveal that researchers are unsatisfied with the maturational paradigm and the narrow focus that it has on the child. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) argue that research on child characteristics such as poverty status, cognitive readiness, intelligence, language abilities, gender, ethnicity, and temperament shows that these factors are important, but that they "account for less than one quarter of the variance in understanding school outcomes" (p. 495). This suggests that there are larger networks and contexts to be studied to understanding outcomes. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta propose an Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition in which the transition to school "takes place in an environment defined by the many

changing interactions among child, school, classroom, family, and community factors" and "child characteristics and contexts interact through a transactional process" over time (p. 499). This model allows for complex interactions such as the results of the NICHD study looking at how parents' marital relations can affect child school outcomes.

Transition Intervention Programs

These two perspectives on the nature of school readiness and its study have very different public policy implications. The maturational paradigm of school readiness yields a crop of children who are ready to become students and those who are not. Several alternatives await those children who are not ready including "transition" or "young five's" classes where children would ideally learn how to learn, but in reality seem to just be waiting on maturation (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). However, those "unready" children who were delayed in entering school or who spent time in a transition classroom do not perform better than other "unready" children who entered kindergarten on time. These results suggest that there is something more than simply maturation occurring and that engaging these "unready" students in the appropriate manner could elicit "ready" behavior and understanding. Carlton & Winsler argue for the application of Vygotskyan sociocultural constructivism by engaging young children in active learning and scaffolding their ability rather than standing by. This application engages the cultural tools of a society and places teachers and parents in the role of mentors to children who may need more attention. This bidirectional perspective deems that school readiness emerges from this interaction between children and adults and that it can be fostered in the right environment.

Similar to the Vygotskyan response to the maturational perspective, ecological models posit that intervention in multiple levels in the child's environment will yield more positive results that a narrow child-focused perspective. Programs which aim to establish continuity for the child, both horizontal and vertical, may ease the transition to schooling for children. The connections between the home, school and community at any given time serve as horizontal continuity; while, the connections between a child's preschool and subsequent kindergarten serve as vertical continuity (Mangione & Speth, 1998). Programs include school visitation by parents, orientations, and guidelines for parental involvement. Thus, creating partnerships between multiple contexts of the child's ecology may allow the child to have more awareness of the transition and also foster and strengthen this connection over time. National programs such as the Head Start Transition Project take this approach and help to train parents in school involvement. Results from the general Head Start program suggest that paying special attention to those children who are at risk for unsuccessful school transitions can help them in their school careers by resulting in less retention and special education and higher graduation rates (Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Entwistle & Alexander, 1998).

Conclusion

The comparison of maturational and ecological perspectives on school readiness sheds some light on the various programs and alternatives that schools provide for children who are deemed "unready." While the maturational perspective is understandable to a certain extent – we certainly would not send three year olds into formal schooling – there is more to the story than simply giving a five year old child time to develop without providing them with stimulation and careful attention. Further,

recognizing that children are influenced by various ecological contexts (home, school, community, culture) and in turn influence those contexts might allow for more purposeful intervention during the transition to school.

Kagan and Neville (1996) revisit the definition of "transition to school" and propose that it "refers to a process, but one that includes not only children adapting to the culture of school but also schools and families adapting to the unique developmental needs and learning stages of young and shift-age children" (p. 388). This view of the transition as a process encompasses both the children who encounter new people and peers and who work to adapt to their new social environment as well as the teachers and parents who are able to monitor children's ability to adapt and gauge what the children need from them to succeed.

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