Do Personal Characteristics Influence Children Starting School?

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The influence of children's personal characteristics can influence how well they start school. This paper reports the findings of a study of 212 children designed to explore the complexity of relationships between children's personal characteristics, family demographics, school factors, parental and non-parental child care in the years prior to school, and children's adjustment to the first year of schooling. The influences of age, gender, language spoken at home, and order of birth on children's early social and academic adjustment are discussed in relation to teacher-rated scores of cooperation, assertion or confidence, self-control and academic competence. The importance of identifying particular sub-populations at risk of difficulties in these areas is identified and some implications for practice are addressed.

Introduction

Children commence schooling with a range of skills that are influenced by their individual dispositions, experiences and backgrounds. They also experience transition in different ways (Dockett, Perry, Howard & Meckley, 1999; Rutter & Rutter, 1992). Children may experience personal incompatibilities and dislocations when there are differences between their individual developmental stages and maturity, and the challenges of the new situation as they commence the first year of schooling (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Erikson, 1963). The passage through this major social change may have a lasting influence on how children view themselves, how others value them, their sense of wellbeing, and their ability to learn (Dunlop, 2000). Consequently, studies of the outcomes of transition to schooling must consider the individual characteristics of children, as well as the nature of the challenges that transition to the school environment represents.

As children start school they are faced with personal challenges as they take on a new identity, and the behaviours and demands associated with being a school child (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dunlop, 2000). They must also cope with a range of physical, social and academic challenges in this new situation (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Cleave, Jowett & Bate, 1982; Ledger, Smith & Rich, 1998) and respond appropriately to those demands. Children are required to function independently, develop relationships with staff and peers,

conform to rules, and to behave in ways that are appropriate for their class and school (Margetts, 2000; Renwick, 1984).

Adjustment to these challenges is a critical outcome of successful transition. This depends partly on past experiences, and on children possessing the skills and knowledge to respond to the demands of the new setting (Ladd & Price, 1987; Rice & O'Brien, 1990). These skills include social competence, problem solving skills, self reliance and determination, and knowing about 'not knowing' and what to do about it (Fabian, 2000). Cooperative play behaviours, non-disruptive group entry strategies and skilled verbal communication skills contribute to the social behaviours that increase children's adjustment to school (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). This adjustment may also be influenced by the level of comfort, familiarity and predictability children experience (Dockett et al., 1997).

Adjustment to schooling is influenced by a variety of personal and family characteristics, societal trends, contextual and life experiences (Reynolds, Weissberg & Kasprow, 1992). The twentieth century notion of mothers assuming responsibility for raising children is being challenged by changes to family structure, work patterns and the availability of child care outside the family. Within the ecological framework, these family and societal trends have implications for children's development and particularly their adjustment to school. Thus with increasing numbers of children experiencing different types of parental and non-parental child care settings for varying hours, there is concern about the influence of different types of care on children's development and their progress in school.

The Study

This paper reports some of the findings of a study designed to explore and add to the knowledge about the complexity of relationships between children's personal characteristics, family demographics, school factors and days per week of parental and non-parental child care, and children's adjustment to the first year of schooling. The study acknowledges that children's environments are diverse and complex and these different environments may support, or strain each child's adaptability.

Participants were 212 children from 12 preparatory classrooms across 4 Melbourne metropolitan government primary school. Children were aged between 52 months and 80 months of age (M= 66.87, sd 4.23). Of these children, 122 were male (57.5%) and 90 were female (42.5%), (M = 0.42, sd 0.50). Staff completed the 57 Item Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Teacher Form) (Elementary Level) developed by Gresham & Elliott (1990). The social skills domain (Items 1-30) involves the subscales of cooperation, assertion and self-control. Academic competence is one small domain. Class teachers completed the SSRS (Elementary Level) for each child during the ninth week of schooling. This timing is consistent with the literature. For example, early school adjustment was measured after 4 weeks of schooling by Slee (1986), after 8 weeks by Ladd & Price (1987), and within 3 months by Pianta & Steinberg (1992). Questionnaires were completed by parents to provide information about the timing, type and extent of children's parental and non-parental child care prior to schooling, personal characteristics, family demographics, and school factors that might predict children's adjustment to the first year of schooling. Analyses of variance and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were employed to determine the contributions of the predictors to adjustment.

Results

As well as the importance of the type, timing and extent of different care on children's lives, this study has shown that particular sub-groups of the population are at increased risk of detrimental outcomes. Children at particular ages, with particular child care experiences,

from particular socio-cultural groups, and with particular school experiences are more vulnerable to adjustment difficulties.

Variations in measures of children's adjustment to school were associated with their child care histories. For example: more out-of-home child care in the early years had a greater impact on children's adjustment than less extensive out-of-home child care arrangements; attendance at 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool provided significant benefits in terms of social skills and academic competence; extensive attendance at centre-based child care (4 or 5 days per week) increased the risk of lower measures of social skills and academic competence; risks were associated with more extensive family day care, occasional care, grandparent care, care by neighbours, friends or others in particular years prior to schooling and; there were some benefits of regular father care and mother care.

The influence of personal characteristics, family demographics and school factors on social and academic adjustment to the first year of schooling

The significance of the control variables differed with, or was specific to, particular measures of adjustment. More importantly, in combination with the indexes of child care, significant child characteristics, family demographics and school factors contribute to our understanding of children's early school adjustment.

In this study, gender, language spoken at home, level of parent employment, receipt of family payment, and numbers of transition activities contributed significantly to social outcomes. Age, language spoken at home, receipt of family payment and numbers of transition activities contributed to academic competence.

Gender: In models with significant indexes of child care, gender was the strongest predictor of cooperation. Gender significantly predicted self control but was generally less powerful than numbers of transition activities and receipt of family payment. Girls had higher scores for these outcomes than boys in the first year of schooling. Gender did not predict assertion or academic competence.

Age: This investigation suggests that while age correlates with academic competence, being older barely predicts or adds to the variance in this outcome in combination with other variables and indexes of child care.

Birth order: Results indicate that first-born children were more likely to have lower scores of cooperation than subsequent or younger children in a family. Birth order contributed less predictive power to cooperation than gender, child care indexes and receipt of family payment.

Language: Predictively, English spoken at home reliably contributed to higher scores of cooperation and was less powerful than gender and child care indexes in these models. English spoken at home was a very strong predictor of higher scores for teacher rated academic competence

Discussion and Recommendations

This study identified that a range of variables influenced and added to adjustment outcomes. More extensive (out-of-home) care in the early years increases the risk of adjustment difficulties, and particular sub-groups of the population are at increased risk of detrimental outcomes. The diversity and complexity of school transition needs to be valued and understood by teachers as they support children moving into the first year of school. Teachers should reflect on the extent to which practices in the early weeks of schooling are

responsive to the diversity of children's backgrounds, needs and abilities. Schools should develop transition programs with many opportunities (formal and informal) for children and their families to visit the school prior to commencement. There should be additional or targeted opportunities for children who are at risk of adjustment difficulties. These include children from low socio-economic backgrounds, who speak only languages other than English at home, and children who do not attend preschool

An investigation for any compensatory effects among the predictors of experiences or conditions that are beneficial for children would be useful. For example, an exploration of interactive effects may identify whether comprehensive transition programs with many opportunities for children to become familiar with the school setting prior to commencement, for children who are boys, first born children, in low socio-economic families, with fathers not in full-time employment, who speak only speak languages other than English at home, or who attend extensive centre-based care, have a positive and compensatory influence on children's early school adjustment.

Above all, researchers, policy makers and practitioners should critically reflect on and proactively introduce the conditions of care and education that best support children's early school development.

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More details of this study can be obtained from the author.