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LINKING SCHOOLS AND EARLY YEARS: WHAT THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE TELLS US

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OUTLINE

- Understanding / defining school readiness
- Evidence regarding early childhood development and learning
- Evidence regarding school readiness and the transition to school
- The Ready Child Equation / Early Learning Equation
- Applying the Early Learning Equation: before and after school commencement
- Final thoughts and conclusions

CONCEPTUALISING SCHOOL 'READINESS'

School readiness can be conceptualised in several fundamentally different ways:

- As primarily or exclusively the development of literacy, numeracy, language and other cognitive skills
- As including young children's motivation to learn, physical health and well-being, capacities to get along with others, curiosity, and self regulatory abilities .
- As a quality of the child, with remedial interventions focusing on deficits in cognitive, motivational, or socioemotional capabilities that are likely to impair academic success
- As a quality of the child, the family, and the school and their interaction with each other

EVIDENCE REGARDING CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING



CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Children develop through their relationships with the important people in their lives
- Sensitive and responsive care giving is a requirement for the healthy neurophysiological, physical and psychological development of a child
- Inadequate, disrupted and negligent care has adverse consequences for the child's survival, health and development
- Infants and caregivers are prepared, by evolutionary adaptation, for caring interactions through which the child's potential human capacities are realized

CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- Relationships of all types have a significant impact on the development and well-being of those involved
- Relationships change brains neurologically and neurochemically, and these changes may be for the better or for the worse
- Brains communicate with other brains through preconscious or infraconscious pathways
- The attachments that children form with parents and caregivers create the central foundation from which the mind develops

CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- Skills develop cumulatively, so that those acquired early form the basis for later skill development
- These are sometimes known as **Matthew effects** - these are initial advantages that lead to cumulative differences that widen preexisting gaps
- The term derives from a line in the Gospel of St. Matthew that says, 'For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath' (XXV:29).
- Although this originally referred to the process whereby one's faith is strengthened, it is most commonly interpreted as 'The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer'.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- Matthew effects have been found in economics, and in many other social spheres, including health, cognitive ability, and academic achievement
- For example, children who have had positive early learning experiences are able to make use of subsequent learning experiences more efficiently, and therefore the gap between these children and those who have had less stimulating early environments progressively widens
- This is how early differences in literacy lead to a widening gap between good and poor readers:
'The very children who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better. Children with inadequate vocabularies — who read slowly and without enjoyment — read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability.' (Stanovich, 1986, p. 381)

CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- Behaviour and functioning at any point in time are more strongly influenced by the immediate social and physical environment than by past experience
- Early behaviour and functioning are predictive of later behaviour and functioning to the extent that children's social and physical environments remain unchanged
- Children's environments tend to remain stable over time: the balance of risk and protective factors is more likely to remain the same than to change significantly
- Current behaviour and functioning are the result of an interaction between learnings and patterns of behaviour arising from earlier environments and experiences, and the child's adaptation to the current environment

CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- Transitions are critical in children's development, providing challenges as well as opportunities for learning and growth
- School entry involves a key transition for all children as well as their families - this transition is not just *to* school, but *from* home, childcare, preschool and kindergarten
- It is a transition not just from early care and learning environments, but often from small-scale to large-scale interactions, from highly personalised to less personalised relationships, and from environments with a limited range of ages to an institution with children of many ages
- It is a transition to a different learning, education and care paradigm
- How well children are prepared for and supported during this transition is important as it impacts on their long term outcomes.

EVIDENCE REGARDING SCHOOL READINESS AND THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL



KEY FINDING ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS

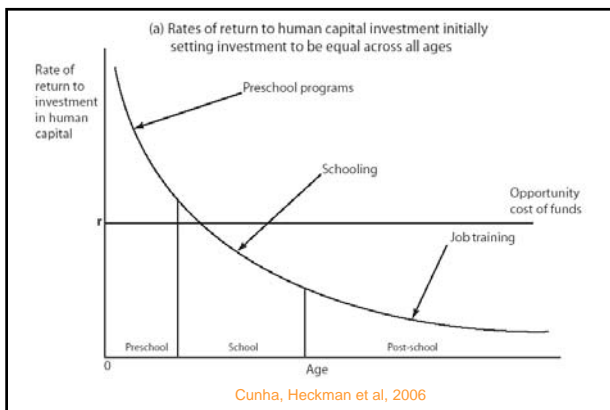
- Children enter school with marked differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills needed for success in the school environment
- These differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success
- Children's school readiness is the outcome of interactions between the children themselves and their surrounding contexts, such as families, peers, neighbourhoods and communities over time
- Academic skills at school entry can be traced to capabilities seen during the preschool years and the experiences in and out of the home that foster their development

KEY FINDING ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS (cont)

- Young children's home environments are strongly associated with their relative skills and abilities upon entry to school
- Parenting programs can help parents provide family environments that contribute positively to their children's development
- Participation in high quality early child care and education programs contributes positively to children's development during the early years and to their school readiness
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit particularly from high quality compensatory early education and care programs during the preschool years
- School readiness is not restricted to cognitive development but is multidimensional, involving physical, social, and emotional development as well as general approaches to learning

KEY FINDING ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS (cont)

- School 'unreadiness' is expensive: failure to start school 'ready to learn' has substantial consequences and costs to society as well as to the child
- Investments in the early years are cost effective, yielding long-term social and economic benefits
- It becomes increasingly difficult and costly to change children's developmental trajectories as they get older, and schools have increasing difficulty compensating for early cognitive and non-cognitive deficits as children grow
- Early investments in children must be followed up by later investments in order to be effective



KEY FINDING ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS (cont)

- The nature of children's relationships determines their success or otherwise of their transition to school: the primary mechanisms through which children acquire readiness-related competencies are the social relationships they form with peers, parents, and teachers
- School-based transition practices have been found to produce more positive academic achievement outcomes, and are particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- The nature and quality of the educational programs and environments provided to children in the early years of schooling (eg. size of class, level of academic instruction) help determine whether preschool-related gaps in academic skills at school entry are quickly eliminated or persist

SUMMARISING THE EVIDENCE

- School readiness is not simply a matter of cognitive or linguistic preparation, but also requires the development of social skills, self regulatory competencies, relational incentives to cooperate and comply, self-confidence, and other socioemotional qualities
- School readiness is not only a matter of the characteristics of the child, but also reflects the influence of significant relationships and the social contexts of early childhood development

... cont

SUMMARISING THE EVIDENCE (cont)

- Enhancing school readiness requires careful consideration of the multiple challenges and supports that exists with in the child, family, child care, and other social environments, particularly for children at demographic risk of subsequent school failure
- School readiness is not only a matter of the influences and experience that precede school entry , but also how young children are enabled to master the expectations and challenges of the early years of school

Thompson and Raikes (2007)

THE READY CHILD EQUATION / EARLY LEARNING EQUATION



THE READY CHILD EQUATION

Ready Families - describes children's family context and home environment.
+
Ready Communities - describes the resources and supports available to families with young children.
+
Ready Services - describes the availability, quality and affordability of proven programs that influence child development and school readiness.
+
Ready Schools - describes critical elements of schools that influence child development and school success.
=
Ready Children - describes what children know and can do in each of the domains of child development including physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development and literacy, and cognition and general knowledge.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (2005)

THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION

Families that are able to support the child's learning
+
Early childhood services that are able to support children's learning as well as to support the family in supporting their children's learning
+
Communities that are able to support the children and families, as well as to support the early childhood services in supporting the families etc.
+
Specialist and other services that are able to provide integrated holistic support to children and families with additional needs, as well as support the early childhood services in supporting the families etc.
+
Schools that are able to support children and families during the preschool years and the transition to school, and are able to meet the individual needs of children once they arrive at school
=
Children who enter school with the motivation and ability to take advantage of the academic and social learning opportunities that schools provide and who continue to learn successfully.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION



APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION

BEFORE SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

Families that are able to support the child's learning

- Offer a range of parenting programs and experiences to help families provide appropriate learning resources and experiences for their young children.
- Create family-friendly environments in early childhood settings and encourage family involvement in centre activities.
- Provide families with information about relevant parenting resources and services.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Early childhood services that are able to support children's learning as well as to support the family in supporting their children's learning

- Provide children with high quality early care and educational experiences. Although early education for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can make a significant difference when those children reach school and beyond, a significant minority of children still lack ready access to early education. This is especially the case if their parents had negative experiences of schooling.
- Blend early childhood care and education provision, recognising that for young children, these are inseparable.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Communities that are able to support the children and families, as well as to support the early childhood services in supporting the families etc.

- Create family-friendly built environments and public facilities that are safe, easy to access, and encourage walking and riding.
- Offer multiple opportunities for families with young children to meet other families with young children, in early childhood and school settings as well as general community settings.
- Ensure that services and facilities are easy to access, open at times that suit families, and are family-friendly and inclusive in their policies and practices.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Specialist and other services that are able to provide integrated holistic support to children and families with additional needs, as well as support the early childhood services in supporting the families etc.

- Establish integrated service networks to ensure that the children and families receive all the help they need and that the factors that can undermine family functioning and effective parenting are addressed.
- These networks can take many forms, including integrated children's centres.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Schools that are able to support children and families during the preschool years and the transition to school, and are able to meet the individual needs of children once they arrive at school

- Build strong links and relationships between schools and early childhood services to ensure continuity of care and joint planning of transition support activities. These links can take many forms, including schools auspicing and providing venues for playgroups and early childhood programs.
- Provide a variety of supports to help ease children's transition to school. This should be built into teachers' roles, with specific responsibilities and time allocations. It is important to differentiate between orientation and true transition support programs.
- Build relationships with the children and families before they commence school, and plan what form of provision may best meet particular children's needs.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Children who enter school with the motivation and ability to take advantage of the academic and social learning opportunities that schools provide and who continue to learn successfully

- Develop relationships with individual children – relationships are the medium through which much of the key learning done by young children occurs
- Provide a range of learning experiences focusing on early literacy, numeracy and language development – make the pedagogies explicit
- Provide a range of learning and social experiences focusing on the promotion of children's social and emotional skills
- Provide a range of learning and social experiences focusing on the development of children's ability to regulate their behaviour

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

AFTER SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

Families that are able to support the child's learning and to support the work of the schools

- Build strong links with families before, during and after transition. It is particularly important to encourage families to maintain their contact and involvement as their children move from child care or preschool environments to school.
- Work in partnership with parents, developing ways of engaging parents in school management and in making use of school facilities for a variety of support services and functions.
- Create a family-friendly environment and facilities in schools to encourage use of school and involvement in school activities.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Communities that are able to support the children and families, as well as to support the schools in supporting the families etc.

- Encourage the use of school facilities by other community groups.
- Build upon the capacity of schools to function as hubs for family, community and service activities – a variety of models for this expanded role have been developed

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Specialist and other services that are able to provide integrated holistic support to children and families with additional needs, as well as support the schools in supporting the families etc.

- Establish integrated service networks to ensure that the children and families receive all the help they need and that the factors that can undermine family functioning and effective parenting are addressed.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Schools that are able to meet the individual needs of children (as well as their families) once they arrive at school

- Build teachers' awareness of the long-term impacts of differences in children's pre-academic skills when they enter school.
- Provide a range of programs / educational strategies that are adapted to the varying needs and learning styles of the children entering school, including programs for children having trouble adjusting or who have behavioural.
- Provide additional resources (in the form of smaller classes and targeted academic support) in the early years of schooling. Invest more of school resources, time and funds in the first year or two of schooling to ensure that children's transition to school goes as smoothly as possible and that they get a solid grounding in the key academic and social skills needed for school success.

APPLYING THE EARLY LEARNING EQUATION (cont)

Children who continue to learn successfully

- Develop relationships with individual children – relationships are the medium through which children's learning and development occur
- Provide targeted support for children's literacy, numeracy and language skills
- Promote the development of children's social and emotional skills
- Promote the development of children's self-regulatory skills, especially their attentional skills (persistence, attention to task)

FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS



FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

- *Reality check*: because some key aspects of the environment are beyond our control, there are limits to what early childhood and family support services and schools can achieve – there will always be children who, despite our best efforts, arrive at school poorly equipped to benefit from the school learning environment
- Nevertheless, there is much scope for improvement, and we are well on the way to understanding how to ensure that more children ready and able to succeed
- The best way of preparing a child for school is to ensure that they have optimal social, emotional and learning experiences and environments during the early years, both at home and in community settings and services.
- To ensure this, we need to create the conditions under which families and communities can meet the needs of children as they (and we) would wish

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