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What happens next? Delivering on the promise of preschool

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ABSTRACT

Although scientific research has clearly shown that preschool programs prepare children for kindergarten, increasing attention has been drawn to whether these early investments in children's education have long-term impacts. Here, we argue that long-term impacts of preschool cannot be viewed in isolation from children's subsequent experiences and, in fact, are unlikely absent of continued investments in children's education. In this commentary, we focus on the following two key themes: (a) What we can expect from one year of preschool education?; and (b) What happens after children enter elementary school. In addressing these themes, we contextualize the work of [Lipsey et al. \(2018\)](#) in the existing evidence base and discuss areas in need of continued empirical attention.

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1. Introduction

Decades of scientific research, including the work done in Tennessee ([Lipsey, Farran, & Durkin, 2018](#)), has shown that preschool programs prepare children for kindergarten, which has led to the expansion of preschool programs across the country ([Duncan & Magnuson, 2013](#); [Heckman, 2006](#)). However, with this expansion of preschool programs, there has been a downward trend in its benefits over time such that the impacts of contemporary programs—like those in Tennessee—are often small as compared with conventional standards ([Duncan & Magnuson, 2013](#)). Despite this downward trend in program benefits, there are only a few contemporary longitudinal and long-term preschool evaluations, which is why this work by [Lipsey et al. \(2018\)](#) contributes greatly to this literature on preschool expansion. The findings of this study also raise important questions that our field must grapple with, especially as we design and plan future expansion and evaluation efforts. Our commentary focuses on these questions and how evidence from Tennessee and other recent large-scale community evaluations can shape the future of preschool education.

2. What should we expect from preschool?

Similar to much of the existing evidence base on preschool education (see [Phillips et al., 2017](#) for a consensus statement), results from Tennessee reveal that preschool programs prepare children for kindergarten: children who attended preschool entered school demonstrating enhanced math, language, and literacy skills with an average treatment effect of roughly 20–35% of a standard deviation (*SD*; depending on the analytic specification). However, these results also parallel a number of other large-scale correlational and experimental studies in the field (e.g., the Head Start Impact Study, Tulsa's preschool programs, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort: [Hill, Gormley, & Adelstein, 2015](#); [Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007](#); [Puma et al., 2012](#)), wherein they show a clear pattern of convergence between children in the treatment and control conditions across the early elementary school years. That is, although there was a strong pattern of impacts at the end of pre-kindergarten, these academic benefits rapidly converged to zero a year later, and by the time children completed second and third grade, those children in the control group actually performed better than their peers in the treatment group on certain assessments. Thus, despite the immediate academic benefits of preschool participation, this initial boost did *not* result in later academic benefits for children.

This convergence in the benefits of preschool can occur for one of two reasons: *catch-up* or *fadeout* (see also: [Ansari, 2018](#); [Bailey, Duncan, Odgers, & Yu, 2016](#); [Yoshikawa et al., 2013](#)). Catch-up occurs when non-preschool attendees accelerate in their learning and development over time and make ground on their peers who attended preschool, whereas fadeout stems from slowed academic

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growth among preschool participants. Although both catch-up and fadeout can help us understand the nature of convergence, results from Tennessee (Lipsey et al., 2018) indicate that the convergence in this community largely occurs because nonparticipants catch-up with their classmates who attended preschool during the early elementary school years. We believe that this very rapid pattern of convergence between preschool attenders and their nonattending peers points to children's subsequent educational experiences as one of the possible determinants of whether the benefits of preschool attendance persist over time. Thus, we focus our discussion on why preschool effects do not persist over time as opposed to on within-preschool factors, which are also important and can improve the short- and long-term impacts of preschool. As part of this discussion, we focus on the role of the elementary school environment, children's individual experiences, and the educational policy landscape.

2.1. The role of the elementary school context

A number of recent studies have considered whether the long-term benefits of preschool vary as a function of children's subsequent educational experiences, but the results have been ambiguous and likely reflect the various ways in which different groups of researchers have defined 'subsequent school experiences', which often fall under two umbrellas.

The first type of research that has tried to address this possibility has focused on the broader elementary school context that children experience. This work has focused on a variety of factors that occur at the school level, including social composition (e.g., racial/ethnic diversity, percent of children receiving free/reduced lunch), academic test scores, safety, and the climate (e.g., parent engagement, teacher turnover) as potential moderators and, overall, has found that children's subsequent school environments matter (Ansari & Pianta, 2018a; Currie & Thomas, 2000; Johnson & Jackson, 2017; Lee & Loeb, 1995; Zhai, Raver, & Jones, 2012). More specifically, results from these studies reveal that the benefits of preschool are sustained over time, but only when children go on to attend higher quality elementary schools. For example, Zhai, Raver, and Jones (2012) found that the early language and literacy benefits of an early childhood program were roughly 70% of a *SD* greater at the end of kindergarten in high-performing schools (as measured by school-level test scores) as compared with low-performing schools. Despite these promising findings, only a handful of studies have considered the role of broader school quality in the persistence of preschool effects. Continued empirical inquiry is necessary because these broader school-level factors are somewhat distal to children's everyday learning and, therefore, it is unclear how they translate into sustained preschool effects.

The second type of research focuses on the more proximal classroom environments that children experience as another potential explanation as to why preschool effects may diminish over time. As part of this effort, a small number of studies have focused on process quality, such as teachers' day-to-day interactions with students (e.g., instructional support, emotional support, classroom organization; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). For example, in our own work (Ansari & Pianta, 2018b), we have examined the multiplicative benefits of high quality teacher-child interactions across both the early and middle childhood years and have found that investments in the early years have sustained academic benefits, but only when coupled with higher quality classroom environments in elementary school. More specifically, results from our work revealed that the documented academic benefits of high-quality child care at the end of preschool (roughly 7–8% of a *SD*) accumulated through age 15 when children later experienced higher quality classroom environments (roughly 18–20% of a *SD*), but for children without such experiences, the benefits of early child care

converged close to zero. Similar findings have also been documented when looking at children's socioemotional development: children who experienced higher emotional and organizational support in preschool and kindergarten demonstrated stronger social behavior (roughly 10–15% of a *SD*) than children who only experienced one year of higher quality classrooms (Broekhuizen, Mokrova, Burchinal, Garrett-Peters, & The Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2016). Unfortunately, most studies, including longitudinal evaluations of preschool, do not collect data on the quality of children's classroom experiences from year-to-year, which prohibits us as a field from fully addressing the conditional benefits of quality preschool experiences. Thus, as a research community, we should pay closer attention to the additive and multiplicative benefits of teacher-child interactions across children's educational careers.

Scholars have also tried to capture other important classroom factors that may explain variation in long-term preschool effects (e.g., Bassok, Gibbs, & Latham, 2015; Claessens, Engel, & Curran, 2014). However, these studies have largely yielded no consistent evidence of heterogeneity. For example, Bassok et al. (2015) examined the persistence of preschool effects for children who experienced a greater number of kindergarten transition practices (e.g., home visits, parent orientation prior to the school year) along with those who subsequently attended smaller classes or full day programs, but found no evidence of moderation. It is important to note that the lack of moderation does *not* imply that these aspects of kindergarten classrooms are unimportant for the early learning and development of young children, only that they do not help maintain the long-term benefits of preschool. Other educational scholars have also begun to consider the importance of instructional content in early elementary school (Bassok et al., 2015; Claessens et al., 2014) and have found that many kindergarten classrooms across the country cover basic instructional content that correspond to skills that preschool attenders may have already mastered (Engel, Claessens, Watts & Farkas, 2016). Somewhat surprisingly, although the content of instruction matters for the early learning and development of young children, there has been little evidence to suggest that these types of classroom processes account for the convergence seen in prior studies of preschool education (Bassok et al., 2015; Claessens et al., 2014). This lack of moderation as a function of instructional content may reflect data limitations, as these aforementioned studies have often been limited as a result of measurement (e.g., teacher report at one point in time). For these reasons, it is also of growing importance that as a field we revisit the tools we use to measure children's classroom experiences, both before and after the transition to kindergarten.

2.2. The role of children's individual experiences

Despite these conflicting findings regarding heterogeneity in the persistence of preschool effects as a function of children's subsequent classroom and school experiences, this research is in its infancy because there are a number of other aspects of the classroom that have yet to be explored that may have implications for the sustainability of preschool effects. In particular, *children's individual experiences* in the classroom, as opposed to classroom-level factors, have the potential to shed light on why convergence is such a common phenomenon in long-term preschool evaluations. Indeed, children who experience preschool may be perceived as doing better by teachers, and because of this, may end up 'getting less' in the classroom (Phillips et al., 2017). As Lipsey et al. (2018) note, the above is a commonly discussed theme in the field, but largely remains an empirically unexamined hypothesis. Collecting this type of data is admittedly resource intensive, but it is critical to enhancing our understanding of how preschool attendance shapes children's development once they enter elementary school.

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