

Pre-kindergarten teachers' use of transition practices and children's adjustment to kindergarten

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Abstract

This study describes pre-kindergarten teachers' use of kindergarten transition practices and examined the extent to which these practices were associated with kindergarten teachers' judgments of children's social, self-regulatory, and academic skills upon their entry into kindergarten. Participants were 722 children from 214 pre-kindergarten classrooms participating in the National Center for Early Development and Learning's (NCEDL) Multi-State Pre-kindergarten Study. Of nine transition practices intended to promote children's adaptation to kindergarten, pre-kindergarten teachers reported implementing, on average, six transition practices, with notable variation across pre-kindergarten classrooms. Children were judged by their kindergarten teachers to have more positive social competencies and fewer problem behaviors when they attended pre-kindergarten classrooms in which more transition activities were implemented and, specifically, in which teachers discussed curricula or specific children with kindergarten teachers. In addition, positive associations between kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's social competence and pre-kindergarten transition activities (total number of activities and activities that children experience directly) were stronger for children who experienced social and economic risks. Implications of these findings related to alignment across the pre-kindergarten to kindergarten settings to improve children's school readiness are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Given evidence that high-quality, comprehensive pre-kindergarten experiences can ameliorate the negative effects of poverty on young children's emerging academic, social and self-regulatory competencies (e.g. Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Reynolds, 2000; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, Mann, 2001; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), early childhood education has received increased funding and is being offered to growing numbers of American children as a means of promoting their readiness for kindergarten. However, as Pianta (1999) describes, successful entry into elementary school requires more than ensuring that children have the requisite competencies to carry with them into a kindergarten setting. Smooth transitions from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten are also a function of linkages that are made between systems, such as connections between schools and families and between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers and classrooms. The need for purposeful coordination between the pre-kindergarten and elementary setting has recently drawn attention as an underutilized avenue that can maintain and

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potentially maximize gains for children achieved in pre-kindergarten (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). There is evidence that suggests children may be at greater risk for school failure and social adjustment problems when experiencing an ineffective transition between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten (Conyer, Reynolds, & Ou, 2003; Goal One Ready Schools Resource Group, 1995), and attention is needed to understand the mechanisms that facilitate smooth transitions and successful child adjustment to the start of formal schooling.

One approach to help children's transition to and adaptation within kindergarten is the use of specific practices that facilitate connections between children, families, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers and classrooms to foster adaptive and supportive experiences (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Kagan, 1991; Zigler & Kagan, 1982). School transition practices aimed at enhancing this supportive link may include visits to kindergarten classes by pre-kindergarten children and teachers, orientation programs for children and parents, or individual meetings between pre-kindergarten teachers and parents and pre-kindergarten teachers and kindergarten teachers. Although there have been widespread attempts to incorporate such transition practices into teachers' yearly routines (e.g., Head Start Performance Standards), Schulting, Malone, and Dodge (2005) recently presented the first and only known empirical study actually linking improved outcomes for kindergarten children to transition activities provided by their kindergarten teachers. Noting the benefits when kindergarten transition planning is evident, there is a need to expand this empirical research base, particularly as it relates to pre-kindergarten teachers' efforts to provide coherent, supportive transition practices to create more successful kindergarten experiences for children. To address this in the current study, we used data from the National Center for Early Development and Learning's (NCEDL) Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten to describe the frequency with which pre-kindergarten teachers use transition practices and examine the extent to which pre-kindergarten teachers' use of transition practices are associated with kindergarten teachers' judgments of children's social, self-regulatory, and academic skills upon their entry into kindergarten.

1.1. Defining school readiness from a developmental/ecological perspective

When the National Education Goals Panel set forth the goal that "all children in American will start school ready to learn" (National Education Goals Panel [NEGP], 1995; Shore, 1998), school readiness implied that a child possessed a certain set of skills that determined if he or she was ready to start school. Ramey and Ramey (1999) identified this view of school readiness as "severely flawed by a disproportionate focus on the child's skills" (p. 218). Although child level factors clearly play a part in school performance (Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003), La Paro and Pianta (2000) found that less than one-fourth of children's kindergarten performance is accounted for by their preschool abilities.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the child as the school readiness indicator, new models encompass a transition to school or "ready schools" framework, seeing the child and his or her abilities as situated within and dependent on a broader contextual perspective (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). These recent models of school readiness emphasize the dynamic nature of relational and informational linkages that provide a web of support for children during a time of immense change (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Downer, Driscoll, & Pianta, 2006; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Specifically, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) note that, in a developmental ecological model, child, family, school, peer, and community factors are interconnected and interdependent throughout the transition period and can be aligned in ways that support children's adjustment to early schooling. Coherent connections within and between these multiple contexts in a child's life leads to stability in relationships and consistency in information-sharing, particularly between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, and teachers and families, which may promote greater early school success. Efforts to create a continuous, seamless experience across settings through curriculum and policy-level issues are often referred to as alignment, whereas transitions practices are the actual intentional attempts to create support and familiarity across pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Linkages can be forged in different ways, like district initiatives and federal transition policies that attempt to regulate development of school, family, and community connections. At a more proximal level, pre-kindergarten teachers' practices can create a bridge of support for children as they transition to kindergarten; it is these transition efforts that are the focus of our study.

1.2. Transition practices

A developmental ecological transition to kindergarten model implies that the use of transition practices will be most effective when aimed at enhancing the linkages between people and settings during early schooling. Specifically,

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