



Enhancing the transition to kindergarten: A randomized trial to test the efficacy of the “Stars” summer kindergarten orientation program^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

This randomized trial tested the efficacy of an intensive, four-week summer program designed to enhance low-income children's transition to kindergarten (n 's = 60 program children, 40 controls). Administered in four public schools, the program focused on social competence, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, school routines, and parental involvement. Hierarchical linear modeling indicated that the program significantly improved teachers' ratings of (a) the transition to the social aspect of kindergarten for girls (but not boys); and (b) the transition to kindergarten routines for the subgroup of children who had the same teacher for kindergarten as for the summer program. Findings are discussed in terms of practices and policies for supporting children's transition to school.

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The transition to formal schooling challenges young children to adapt rapidly to new physical and social environments, new academic demands, and new routines (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000; Ladd & Price, 1987). Positive transition experiences are associated with more favorable academic and social outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Children who adapt more easily to new school routines are also more likely to participate in class activities and to enjoy school (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd & Price, 1987; Ladd et al., 2000). Many children have trouble making the transition to school, however. A national survey of 3595 kindergarten teachers found that they considered just 50% of their students to have made a successful transition to school (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Better programs and policies to enhance children's transition to school are required. This paper contributes to the small body of empirical literature on the transition to kindergarten by employing a randomized controlled trial to test the efficacy of a new, intensive summer program designed to enhance low-income kindergarteners' transition to school.

1. Children's transition to school

The dominant theoretical framework for understanding the transition to school emphasizes children's multiple environments and the interactions among them (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufmann, & Cox, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1999). This framework highlights the need to prepare children not only for the cognitive demands of school work but also for the social demands such as peer relationships and the need to follow classroom routines. Research has begun to address not only children's readiness for school but also children's experience of the transition itself (e.g., initial adjustment and acclimation) and the means by which families and schools can collaborate to smooth the transition from home, child care, and/or preschool to the typically more formal and demanding kindergarten environment (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Children at risk of a difficult transition share many of the same characteristics as children at risk of poor performance in school. Risk factors are both individual and contextual (Sameroff, Bartko, Baldwin, Baldwin, & Seifer, 1998). Children's access to sufficient economic and social resources, including family income, social support, and health care has been linked to early school performance (Huston et al., 2001). The risk context for low-income children's development extends to the schools they attend, which are typically less prepared to receive children than schools that serve higher-income children (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). In addition to general school resources, there is evidence that teachers' perceptions of children from low-income families are more negative than their perceptions of children from higher-income families, regardless of children's cognitive abilities (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). Thus, teachers' perceptions of children's abilities can them-

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selves be considered resources that are distributed unequally, and that influence children's school performance. The early sorting and categorizing of children that takes place in kindergarten establishes achievement trajectories that persist throughout the school career (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Ramey & Ramey, 1999), making the transition period a vitally important time, especially for children with multiple risk factors.

2. Programmatic approaches to enhancing children's transition to school

Services to support children's transition to school are unsystematic and limited to community- and school-specific practices, rather than programs, *per se*. The most common strategies for enhancing children's transition to school include mailing information to parents before school begins, inviting parents to visit the classroom early in the school year, and staggering entry of children into the classroom (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). A recent survey indicated that families welcome overtures from schools, with most parents eager to be more involved in their children's transition to kindergarten (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007). Greater parental involvement in children's schooling is in turn linked to children's higher grades, better school attendance, more positive attitudes and behaviors, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in higher education (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Collaboration between parents and teachers is associated with improved communication and greater trust that in turn supports children's transition to school (Child Trends, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001).

Children and families are especially likely to benefit from personalized, proactive, and intensive practices, such as home visits by teachers, communication between preschool and kindergarten teachers, and personalized interaction in the kindergarten classroom among the teacher, parent, and child prior to the beginning of kindergarten (Schulting et al., 2005). For example, one study found that kindergarten children whose preschool and kindergarten teachers had talked to one another about curricula or specific child characteristics were later viewed as more socially competent by their kindergarten teachers (LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008). In another study, children who attended preschool programs located within their elementary school were found to have fewer behavior problems than those who attended preschool off site, suggesting that stability in location plays a role in facilitating children's transitions to formal schooling (Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007). Other transition practices, especially those that engage parents, are particularly effective for children from families of low socioeconomic status (those most at risk for transition difficulties) (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Schulting et al., 2005). The most frequently used transition practices, however, are those that take place after school begins and involve low-intensity, generic contact such as flyers, brochures and open houses (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2001). Moreover, at-risk children who could—and, in fact, do—benefit the most from personalized and intensive practices (e.g., low-income, minority children living in metropolitan areas) are those least likely to receive them (Pianta, Cox et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000; Schulting et al., 2005).

The "Stars" program, which emphasizes social and behavioral skills, was originally conceived and implemented by a kindergarten teacher and a parent. Subsequently, it was expanded, drawing on both prior informal evaluations and developmental theory and research on the transition to kindergarten, as well as pilot-tested, by the authors. On the basis of pilot results, the program was further

adapted and implemented in four local public elementary schools and evaluated through the current randomized trial. To our knowledge, there are no other theory- and research-based kindergarten orientation programs, comparable to the Stars program, that have been rigorously evaluated or disseminated.

3. The current study

The current study employed a randomized controlled trial to test the efficacy of the Stars program. We examine the extent to which children randomly assigned to the program (a) experienced an easier transition to kindergarten than control children, according to ratings made by their kindergarten teachers and by their mothers; and (b) reported liking school more than control children. Given some evidence in the literature that the effects of both early interventions and school transition practices can vary by such factors as child sex and family SES (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Crockenberg, 2003; Schulting et al., 2005), we also explore whether program effects hold across participant groups defined by child sex, race/ethnicity, prior child care experience, baseline behavior problems, and maternal education and marital status. Finally, we examine the effect of the child having had the same classroom teacher for Stars and for kindergarten.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were students entering kindergarten at four public elementary schools in a small southeastern city. The schools, each serving grades K-5, ranged in size from 380 to 642 students and were considered by the district administration to serve a high proportion of children at risk for academic failure. Three of the four schools enrolled over 85% low-income students (defined as those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). The fourth enrolled approximately 50% low-income students. All schools had experienced inadequate performance on state end-of-grade tests.

In response to initial, positive experiences with the program during its development and pilot-test phase, all of the schools' principals welcomed the implementation of the Stars program at their schools. Principals further welcomed our hiring some of their teaching staff, most of whom had worked in prior iterations of the program, to serve as Stars program providers. The principals also allowed our research team to recruit children entering kindergarten at their schools for random assignment into the program/control groups and for participation in the research.

Research staff members recruited 103 children and their mothers during school registration in the spring preceding kindergarten matriculation. Mothers agreed, through standard informed consent procedures (approved by the University Institutional Review Board) that they and their child would take part in the study and would attend the Stars program if randomly assigned to do so. Of the original 103 participants, three moved prior to beginning kindergarten and thus were eliminated from the study. 1 provides descriptive statistics for the remaining 100 participants. Children (57% female, 43% male) ranged in age from four to six years and were predominantly Latino (48%) or African American (32%). Twenty percent were White, Asian, or another race/ethnicity. Forty percent of the children's mothers identified Spanish as their primary language. Seventy-nine percent of the children had received non-parental child care or preschool services for at least eight months in the year prior to random assignment.

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