



Review

Formal versus informal prekindergarten care and school readiness for children in immigrant families: A synthesis review[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The U.S. is witnessing two major trends in its rising cohorts of young children preparing to start school: an increase in the utilization of formal (e.g., center-based) childcare options in the year before starting kindergarten and an increase in the share of these young children who come from immigrant families. Given that many children from immigrant families in the U.S. start school at a disadvantage relative to native-born children, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners have inquired into which prekindergarten alternatives might be most effective at boosting school readiness for this group of children. This review covers the effects of formal versus informal prekindergarten alternatives in the year before entering school on a commonly-explored set of child-level academic and socioemotional indicators of school readiness for children in immigrant families in the U.S. In contrast to remaining in informal care, children in immigrant families showed fairly consistent, positive academic and socioemotional effects of attending formal prekindergarten in the year before kindergarten for children in immigrant families. Compared to native-born children in formal care, children from immigrant families in formal care showed some positive, but not as consistent, evidence of closing gaps between these two groups across school readiness indicators. Finally, there are several, noteworthy common limitations in this body of literature, which can be used to shape future research agendas and policy dialogue.

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1. Overview

This study provides a first comprehensive review of the role that formal versus informal prekindergarten care (as defined below) in the year prior to kindergarten has played in affecting academic and socioemotional indicators of school readiness for children in immigrant families in the United States (U.S.). This is critical for three interrelated reasons, as laid out in further detail in the introduction below. First, more families in the U.S. are utilizing formal prekindergarten options to care for their children. Second, the U.S. is experiencing changes to its demographics of school-aged children, in which an increasingly larger share of children entering school are from first or second-generation immigrant families. Third, there is a concern about whether children in immigrant families are prepared to enter U.S. schools, particularly when compared to children in native-born families.

As such, formal prekindergarten might serve as one potential policy lever by which children in immigrant families can be better prepared for school and by which schooling gaps between immigrant and native-born children might close. Therefore, a better understanding as to how to address school readiness for children in immigrant families appeals to a wide range of educational stakeholders: By identifying which prekindergarten care options best facilitate academic and socioemotional development, the findings from this study can help to develop more informed research agendas and policy decisions based on a broader understanding of the effects of early childhood education for a subset of young children with an increasing presence in U.S. schools.

2. Introduction

Two key trends are occurring in early childhood in the U.S. in the year preceding kindergarten (i.e., when formal education begins, generally at around age 5). First, more and more children under the age of 5 are attending prekindergarten in formal settings, potentially as a result of a growing maternal workforce, single parenting, or changes to job prospects (Burchinal, 1999; Committee of Family and Work Policies, 2003; Spain & Bianchi, 1996; Takanishi, 2004; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 1999; Yamauchi & Leigh, 2011). These formal, organized, and school-like childcare settings include center-based care and Head Start; features might include care outside the child's home, trained providers, extensive peer interaction, and an overt focus on development and learning (Cannon, Jacknowitz, & Karoly, 2012; Clark-Stewart et al., 1994; Crosnoe, 2007; Scarr, 1998; Takanishi, 2004). In contrast, fewer children are now found exclusively in informal care settings, which are characterized by parental care, relative care, and non-relative non-parental care such as a babysitter or nanny; these currently less-common options are characterized by likely taking place in the child's or caretaker's home, having unstructured activities, untrained providers, no overt focus on development or learning, and potentially less peer interaction (Crosnoe, 2007).

Blau and Currie (2004) found that generally speaking, most prekindergarten-aged children (i.e., children under 5 years old) in the U.S. were being cared for in formal settings – and the majority of these children were found in center-based care (Administration for Children and Families, 2006; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007). Recent research has shown that of a national sample of children who were in prekindergarten in the year before entering kindergarten, approximately 70 percent were in a center (Author, 2014).

Given this increased utilization of formal prekindergarten care, researchers have inquired as to whether it is indeed an effective option for preparing children to start school – that is, in boosting school readiness. In this study, we employ a commonly-supported definition of school readiness, which is laid out by Crosnoe (2007) as: “the cognitive, social, and emotional skills that allow children to ‘get a good start’ in elementary school” (p. 153). This definition directly corresponds with policy and practice rhetoric. For instance, the National Education Goals Panel (1997) defined five aspects of school readiness; of the five aspects, four directly correspond with the Crosnoe (2007) definition, with the fifth being physical health. We do not focus on physical health, however, in order to focus on educational rather than physical competencies at school entry (Snow, 2006). Moreover, the academic and socioemotional skills align with the types of assessments given to children at kindergarten entry to test readiness (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). We recognize that other aspects of school readiness exist, such as “ready families, ready communities ... and ready schools” (p.1; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). However, our study focuses on child-level school readiness.

On average, children in the U.S. are shown to be more academically school-ready from having attended formal prekindergarten prior to starting kindergarten (Burchinal, 1999; Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001;

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