



Socioeconomic gradients in school readiness of Chinese preschool children: The mediating role of family processes and kindergarten quality



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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) on the school readiness of Chinese preschool children in Hong Kong. A total of 69 teachers from 20 kindergartens in both rich and poor districts in Hong Kong rated the school readiness of 567 preschool children using the Chinese version of the Early Development Instrument. Information about home learning activities and kindergarten characteristics was obtained from parents and preschool teachers, respectively. The results indicated a gradient relationship between SES and total EDI scores, with children from higher-SES families rated as being very ready for school on more domains of the Chinese version of the Early Development Instrument than those from lower-SES families. Home learning activities (reading and recreational activities) and teachers' experience and kindergarten facilities significantly mediated the socioeconomic gradient effects. These findings highlight that efforts are much needed in tackling the developmental disparity and the promotion of better parent–child interaction, teacher quality, and kindergarten facilities might be able to help all children attain their own developmental potential.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of research has shown that disparities in family socioeconomic status (SES) translate into inequalities starting from early childhood that persist through life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Like many other places around the world, Hong Kong has seen the simultaneous growth of homelessness, poverty, and wealth over the past decade, and this is reflected in rising inequalities among social groups and city neighbourhoods (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Despite a sizable body of research documenting the socioeconomic disparities in child development between the rich and the poor in Western and developed countries (Collison, Dey, Hannah, & Stevenson, 2007; House, 2002; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Schnittker, 2004; Williams, 1990; Williams & Collins,

1995), the understanding of the situation among young Chinese children is still rather limited. This study focuses on understanding the effect of poverty on early achievement. This paper presents data from the first phase of an on-going cohort study and examines home and kindergarten influences on children's school readiness.

Contemporary notions of school readiness consider a child's readiness for school, the school's readiness for children, and family and community supports contributing to child readiness (High, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Early Childhood Adoption and Dependent Care, & Council on School, 2008). A child's readiness for school is a holistic concept including both learning and development. A school's readiness for children focuses on the school environment and practices, whereas the family contribution to school readiness for the child focuses on the parental attitudes and interactions with their children. This study considered the interface between these three components of school readiness with a primary focus on the child. Existing available measurements of school readiness have focused on the child's readiness for school, and thus conventionally this component itself has been referred to as "school readiness".

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1.1. Socioeconomic disparities in development and learning

Family SES is an aggregate measure that typically incorporates the parents' economic, educational, and occupational status as a measure of the family's financial, human and social capital (Coleman, 1988). Each step down the family SES ladder, resources and opportunities for better development diminish. This phenomenon creates socioeconomic gradients in children's development. Indeed, many studies have reported graded relationships between SES and a range of social and cognitive outcomes, including neurocognitive development, maladaptive social functioning, emotional problems, and behavioral disorders (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009). Socioeconomic gradients have also been observed for premature birth (DiPietro, Costigan, Hilton, & Pressman, 1999), low birth weight, and congenital anomalies (Smith, Budd, Field, & Draper, 2011; Vrijheid et al., 2000).

Although the recognized gradients between SES and developmental outcomes indicate that children from the lowest-SES groups are more disadvantaged, the optimal strategy in reducing health inequality is proportionate universalism, which means that intervention efforts should be implemented to a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage (Oberklaid, Baird, Blair, Melhuish, & Hall, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to identify effective means to uncouple children's early life experiences and developmental opportunities from family SES. A meta-analysis of 35 studies published between 1990 and 2000 that assessed short- and long-term benefits of early interventions found large positive effects on academic achievement lasting over 5–10 years as measured by standardized tests (Gorey, 2001). Furthermore, those who had attended preschool had substantially fewer personal and social problems over a 10–25-year period as measured by cumulative indices.

1.1.1. The achievement gap

As noted earlier, the disparities in early development between children from rich and poor families from Western countries are well documented. Duncan and Magnuson (2005) reported that the socioeconomic gap in school readiness was substantial at kindergarten age. The situation does not seem to improve as the child progresses through school (Duncan et al., 2007) and the achievement gap tends to widen over time (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). These data challenge the commonly held belief that public education is “the great equalizer” that enables all students to have an equal chance to thrive in school and in life (Hechinger, 1976).

Although research in the United States has documented sizable socioeconomic disparities in achievement, such large disparities do not appear to exist among high school students in Hong Kong. In the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15-year-olds from Hong Kong were among the top performers in mathematics, reading and science (OECD, 2014) and Hong Kong students have performed consistently well in such cross-national tests. Further, data from the PISA indicate that Hong Kong combines both high levels of performance with equity in educational opportunities as schools for children from low-SES families do not have fewer educational resources than schools that serve children from other families. It is not clear whether large disparities exist at the starting gate of school and whether they decrease over time because of the quality of public education.

1.1.2. SES and the home learning environment

Parents from lower-SES backgrounds tend to use fewer appropriate parenting strategies and invest less in a child's cognitive development than other parents and this leads to SES disparities in child development (Reardon, 2010). However, children from low-SES families can also thrive. Factors that determine positive outcomes often reside in the family context and the kindergarten

(Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Research has consistently indicated that the following characteristics are common to families that contribute to child's readiness, including (i) parents engaging child in reading and storytelling (Lee, 1993); (ii) parental involvement in child's homework and academic learning activities (Haney, & Hill, 2004); and (iii) parents playing with child, such as singing, drawing, playing sports and games (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Nelson & Sheridan, 2010). Indeed, children from both Chinese and Western cultures seem to benefit from rich parent–child interactions, which are considered to be one of the key features of ready families (Britto, 2012; Li & Rao, 2000).

1.2. Culture and the home learning environment

In addition to SES-related factors, culture influences child-rearing beliefs, and in turn, parenting styles and practices. Chinese parents are influenced by the Confucian value system which emphasizes academic achievement, diligence, self-restraint, filial piety, and the significance of education for personal improvement and moral self-cultivation (Lee, 1996; Li, 2003; Rao & Chan, 2009). However, Confucianism itself has a contested and evolving identity (Wong & Wong, 2002), and this together with greater exposure to Western influences may result in somewhat different parenting practices in Hong Kong compared to mainland China. For example, a comparative study of home literacy practices found that parents in Beijing used story-telling for moral education whereas parents in Hong Kong used stories to entertain children (Li & Rao, 2000).

The dimensions of warmth and control have been used to classify parenting into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful styles (Baumrind, 1971). However, Chinese parenting includes behaviors that cannot be adequately captured by the terms authoritarian or authoritative parenting. It also reflects *guan* (“to govern”, “to care for”, and “to love”) and *chiao shun* (training). The latter refers to the continual monitoring and correcting of children's behavior to ensure they meet societal standards (Chao, 1994). The culturally-based constructs of *guan* and *chiao shun* may account for the fact that Chinese children show relatively high behavioral and emotional inhibition, important precursors of school readiness (Rao, Sun, & Zhang, 2014). However, extant research with Chinese parents has not investigated social class differences in these manifestations of Chinese parenting.

Chinese parents engage their children in academic learning activities, enforce proper behaviors and social norms, and exert control more frequently than Western parents (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song, 2013). Within Chinese societies, parents' involvement in school-related activities is correlated with children's school readiness and literacy achievement. Lau, Li, and Rao (2011) found that homework supervision and the provision of language and cognitive activities, and home-based involvement predicted children's school readiness in both Hong Kong and in Shenzhen. Li and Rao (2000) also found that parental involvement in literacy activities at home significantly contributed to the prediction of children's Chinese literacy attainment in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore, despite the fact that there were differences in overall literacy attainment in the three cities. These studies illustrate the need for sensitivity to the cultural context but also illustrate that the relationship between parental involvement in home-learning activities and child school-readiness may transcend cultural differences in parenting.

1.2.1. The nature of parent–child interactions

Research has highlighted the developmental importance of play activities during early childhood. Reading and entertainment such as art, music and sports, constitute the main content of play for kindergarten-aged children, and contribute significantly to the social, emotional, and intellectual well-being of children (Ginsburg,

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