Resilience in Children Experiencing Homelessness: Preschool Attendance & Later Academic Success

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Abstract: This study examines whether preschool attendance is related to later academic success among children experiencing homelessness. Research on this topic is imperative for addressing inequality and achievement disparities. Prior research suggests that early childhood education fosters school readiness, particularly for children from high risk or marginalized backgrounds. Data were drawn from two studies conducted in the same shelters, including 215 children ages 4-6 and their caregivers. Parents reported on preschool experience during a shelter stay; after the children entered kindergarten or first grade, their teachers reported on school adjustment. The hypothesis that attending preschool for at least a year would relate to better school outcomes was not supported. The level of risk for these students may overwhelm effects of preschool or it may be important to consider the quality of preschool education. Additional research is needed to inform efforts to promote school success among children experiencing homelessness.

Background

- Children who experience homelessness are at very high risk for achievement disparities and behavioral problems at school (Masten et al., 2015). As a result, there is considerable interest in understanding predictors of better school outcomes among these children to inform efforts to foster school success.
- Research on disadvantaged children indicates that preschool experience is associated with school readiness and better school outcomes (Bowens & Morote, 2009; Huston, Gupta, & Schexnayder, 2012).
- Environments that facilitate growth, produce children who outperform peers (Valenti & Tracey, 2009).
- Although early childhood education is expensive, school readiness programs show high returns on investment, particularly for disadvantaged children over longer time intervals (Heckman, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2011).

Hypothesis

Children who have experienced homelessness and went to preschool for at least one year, will have better school achievement in reading, spelling, and math than homeless and highly mobile (HHM) students who did not.

Methods

- 157 children 4 to 6 years old (66% female) were included in the analyses. Data were drawn from a larger study of 215 families residing in shelters.
- Parents (92% female) completed questionnaires with demographic information, child history, and preschool attendance.
- Length of child preschool attendance was scored dichotomously (0 < one year and 1 = one year or more).
- 88% of the children were later located in more than 90 schools and 87% of their kindergarten and 1st grade teachers returned a questionnaire.
- Teachers completed achievement rating scales drawn from the Child Health and Behavioral Questionnaire (Armstrong, Goldstein, and McArthur Working Group, 2003).
- Dependent variable: Teachers rated math, reading, spelling, and overall on a scale of 1 ("Poor") to 5 ("Excellent"), and rated performance over the past 6 months 1 ("Not well at all") to 5 ("Very well").

Results

- 56% of the overall sample attended preschool more than a year.
- Independent t-tests were conducted to test for mean differences in achievement comparing the two groups of children with less and more preschool experience. No significant differences were found (see Figure 2). Controlling for sex and age did not change the results.

Discussion

- My hypothesis was not supported that attending one year of preschool will predict better academic outcomes.
- Possible Limitations
  - Limitations of this study include possible teacher bias in reporting, unknown quality of preschools attended, missing outcome data, the uniqueness of population sampled, and the short-term follow-up design in that preschool may not show immediate positive academic benefits.

Implications

- Preschool alone may not be a substantial protective factor for extremely high risk populations. More investigation is needed regarding the promotion of school success among children experiencing homelessness.

Future Directions

Future research could investigate the following:

- School readiness skills, including self-regulation (Masten, 2012; Masten et al., 2015).
- Effects of age at the start of preschool (Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller & Rumberger, 2007).

- Effects related to race and age (Gormley & Gayer, 2005; Valenti & Tracey, 2009).
- Quality of teacher-child relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2010).

Photos courtesy of Dr. Ann Masten