

The Transition to Kindergarten for Typically Developing Children: A Survey of School Psychologists' Involvement

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Abstract Research suggests that a large percentage of kindergarten children do not successfully transition to school (Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000). As a result, a number of school transition initiatives have been developed by educators and policy makers to address the difficulties young children may experience upon kindergarten entry. Despite this attention, our review found no studies examining the involvement of school psychologists in kindergarten transition practices. The present study reports the outcomes of a national survey of the membership directory of the National Association of School Psychologists examining school-based involvement in kindergarten transition activities; school psychologists' perceived involvement with and training in kindergarten transition activities; and school psychologists' perceived barriers to engage in kindergarten transition activities. Results showed that most schools engaged in at least one kindergarten transition activity per year, with half of the responding sample reporting involvement. School psychologists were

more likely to be involved in kindergarten transition activities if they were employed in an urban locale or a large to moderate-sized school setting. School psychologists most frequently reported involvement with kindergarten screenings and collaborating with kindergarten and preschool teachers. Implications and recommendations for practice among early childhood and other educational professionals are delineated.

Keywords Kindergarten transition · Early childhood education · School psychology

Introduction

Young children's participation in kindergarten has increased over the past several decades in the United States (West et al. 2000). It has been estimated that nearly all five-year-old children attend kindergarten (U.S. Census Bureau 2008), with 60 % attending full-day programs and 40 % attending half-day programs (Wirt et al. 2004). As the number of young children entering kindergarten has grown, the demographic characteristics and early educational experiences of these children have become increasingly more heterogeneous (Hernandez et al. 2007). In addition, more children enter kindergarten displaying health problems or difficulties in physical activity, attention, and speech that require supplemental educational or medical services than a decade ago (U.S. Department of Education 2003). Differences in school readiness characteristics have also been reported, including dissimilarities in young children's general knowledge, approaches to learning, social competence, and emergent reading and mathematics skills (West et al. 2000). Based on a national survey of kindergarten teachers, Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2000)

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reported that 52 % of kindergarten students experienced a successful transition, 32 % experienced a moderately difficult transition, and 16 % experienced a difficult transition. Collectively, these factors may account for the substantial number of young children who are delayed entry into kindergarten for one or more years (6 %), or who are retained in kindergarten for one or more years (5 %) (U.S. Department of Education 2005).

One of the most effective ways to promote young children's academic and behavioral development is to provide positive, early school experiences (Reynolds 2004). However, as many young children transition to kindergarten, a number of difficulties may emerge. First, routines previously established in childcare, preschool, or home environments may be disrupted during this period (Fowler et al. 1991; Wildenger et al. 2008). Second, differences between these environments may be conspicuous for many young children, creating further adjustment difficulties, especially for children with cumulative risk factors (e.g., federal poverty status, family type, primary home language) (Bowman 1999; Rathbun and West 2004). Third, many caregivers may experience difficulty adapting as their young children begin formal schooling (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003). As a result, it has been recommended that elementary school personnel promote positive experiences for young children during the transition to kindergarten (Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2011; Vecchiotti 2003; Wildenger and McIntyre 2012).

Kindergarten Transition Programs

One way to provide young children with positive, early school experiences is to formally program kindergarten transition activities (Fowler et al. 1991; Wildenger and McIntyre 2012). Traditionally, the most common transition practices identified in the literature for typically developing children include student-centered activities (e.g., school visits, teacher contacts), parent- or family-centered activities (e.g., orientation sessions, family field trips), and school-centered activities (e.g., screenings, teacher contacts) (LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Love et al. 1992). However, research examining the effectiveness of kindergarten transition programs has been limited in scope (Wildenger and McIntyre 2012; Vecchiotti 2003). Eckert et al. (2008) reviewed the research on kindergarten transition programs for typically developing students. These authors found few empirical studies ($n = 7$); all of which were published within the past 5 years. Only one study explored the effects of kindergarten transition programs and policies on students' educational outcomes, with the remainder examining teachers' and mothers' perceptions of the kindergarten transition process.

As concluded by Eckert et al. (2008) in their literature review as well as others (Entwisle and Alexander 1993; Wildenger and McIntyre 2012; Zill 1999), very little is known regarding the effectiveness of kindergarten transition practices for typically developing children. However, some general conclusions can be drawn regarding the current state of kindergarten transition practices for typically developing children. First, teachers reported that kindergarten transition practices were predominately generic, such as sending fliers home and conducting open-houses (Pianta et al. 1999). Second, teachers reported receiving minimal information, training, or support regarding kindergarten transition practices (Early et al. 1999). Third, school district practices and policies appear to negatively impact teachers' capabilities to engage in kindergarten transition practices. For example, teachers reported that school districts do not provide summer work compensation for kindergarten transition activities (Pianta et al. 1999). Furthermore, teachers reported that kindergarten classroom lists are typically generated a few days prior to the opening of school, making it difficult to proactively engage in kindergarten transition activities (Pianta et al. 1999).

Although a number of kindergarten transition initiatives have been proposed by educators and policy makers, few U.S. programs have been implemented or evaluated, and a number of barriers appear to negatively impact current practices. In addition, recent research examining family experiences and involvement with kindergarten transition suggests a need for educational professionals to increase family-school partnerships during this critical juncture. McIntyre et al. (2007) examined the perspectives of families whose typically developing children had recently completed early education programs and were beginning the transition to kindergarten. The majority of caregivers expressed interest in receiving more information about the transition process, including information about kindergarten expectations, as well as learning how to assist their child during the kindergarten transition process. Many caregivers reported concerns regarding the transition process (e.g., learning to navigate the school environment) and their child's ability to meet the academic and behavioral expectations in kindergarten. Furthermore, increased family concerns surrounding kindergarten transition for children receiving additional educational supports was reported in a study conducted by McIntyre et al. (2010). The results of this comparative survey of families with preschool children that were either typically developing or receiving special education services indicated that caregivers of children receiving special education services in preschool settings expressed significantly more concerns regarding their child's adaptive behavior, communication skills, emergent academic skills, and overall readiness for kindergarten than caregivers of typically developing children.

Due to the increased emphasis on family-school partnerships and the importance of kindergarten transition, there has been increased attention to promote successful kindergarten transition for children by school psychologists (Prout and Cowan 2006). The importance of school psychology practice addressing early childhood factors that affect school competence was one of the broad themes identified in the 2002 Multi-site Conference on the Future of School Psychology. Three of the priority outcome goals directly (i.e., Outcome 3: Enhanced family-school partnerships and parental involvement in schools) or indirectly (i.e., Outcome 1: Improved academic competence for all children; Outcome 2: Improved social-emotional functioning for all children) related to improving early educational experiences for young children entering school (Dawson et al. 2003/2004). However, no data have been published regarding school psychologists' current involvement with kindergarten transition activities nor has any data been published regarding the current barriers to school psychologists' involvement with kindergarten transition activities.

Purpose of the Present Study

Given the importance of providing children and their families with positive early school experiences, the established research and policy agendas addressing the early academic success of typically developing children, and the increased attention for school psychologists to become involved with kindergarten transition practices, it is important to examine school psychologists' current involvement with kindergarten transition practices. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine school psychologists' involvement in kindergarten transition activities and three primary aims were examined: (a) school-based involvement with kindergarten transition activities; (b) school psychologists' perceived involvement with and training in kindergarten transition activities; and (c) school psychologists' perceived barriers to engage in kindergarten transition activities. In addition to obtaining a descriptive account of school psychologists' involvement in kindergarten transition activities, additional exploratory analyses were conducted to examine whether demographic factors (i.e., school locale, school size) were related to school psychologists' involvement in kindergarten transition activities.

Methods

Participants

A total of 500 participants were selected from the membership directory of the National Association of School

Psychologists (NASP). A geographic stratification procedure was employed to randomly sample school psychologists from each of the five regions of the United States (Northeastern, Southeastern, West Central, North Central, Western). Of the 500 surveys mailed, 13 were returned as undeliverable and 37 were unusable (i.e., respondents were not school psychologists); therefore, response rate was determined using the remaining 450 surveys. Of these, 294 (65 %) were returned. However, inspection of the surveys revealed that 43 % ($n = 128$) had not been actively involved with school psychological service delivery. These surveys were subsequently discarded and 166 were retained for the final analysis. This represents 37 % of the usable sample of 450.

Instrumentation

To assess school psychologists' involvement in kindergarten transition activities, a two-page questionnaire consisting of three sections was developed. The first section required respondents to provide demographic information including: (a) gender; (b) state of residence, (c) highest degree obtained; (d) number of years employed as a school psychologist; and (e) primary grade level(s) of students served. In addition, respondents were asked to answer a number of questions pertaining to the demographic characteristics of their school(s) including: (a) type of school, (b) locale, and (c) student enrollment. In the second section of the packet, respondents were asked to respond to questions pertaining to their experiences with kindergarten transition. Areas assessed included: (a) current school practices and involvement with kindergarten transition activities; (b) training in kindergarten transition activities; and (c) perceived barriers to implementing kindergarten transition activities. In the final section of the survey, respondents were asked to review 16 activities related to kindergarten transition, indicate whether these activities had been implemented in their school district, and specify their current level of involvement as well as their desired level of involvement. The selected activities were based on a review of current kindergarten transition practices disseminated in the literature (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003).

Procedure

Prior to conducting the survey, the research procedures were reviewed and approved by the governing Institutional Review Board. The survey and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope were mailed to each potential participant. All participants were informed in the consent letter that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and participants were permitted to withdraw at any time. To assist with the re-mailing of surveys, each assessment packet was

coded with a removable identification number that corresponded to the name and address of the participant. Participants were informed that if they did not approve of their survey being coded, they could remove the attached label. A re-mailing of the survey was conducted 10 weeks following the initial mailing.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Participating Sample

Table 1 presents a descriptive breakdown of the major demographic variables of the respondents. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were similar to national demographic characteristics of NASP members (Curtis et al. 2007). Overall, most of the respondents were female (77.6 %), had earned a masters or educational specialist degree (64.7 %), were employed as a school psychologist for 1–5 years (31.6 %), and lived in the Northeastern region of the US (42.2 %). In addition, most of the respondents were employed in public school settings (82.6 %), located in suburban locale (31 %), with a moderate (i.e., 301–999 students) enrollment (58.1 %). All of the participants reported involvement with activities at the elementary level, and the majority of participants worked primarily at the elementary level (67.8 %) (Table 2).

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

	% (n)
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	77.6 (90)
Male	22.4 (26)
<i>Degree</i>	
Masters or masters plus 30 credits	64.7 (75)
PhD, EdD, PsyD	30.2 (35)
Other	4.3 (5)
<i>Years employed</i>	
1–5	31.6 (36)
6–10	22.8 (26)
11–15	10.5 (12)
16–20	13.2 (15)
21 or more	21.9 (25)
<i>Geographic region</i>	
Northeastern	42.2 (46)
Southeastern	24.8 (27)
North central	9.2 (10)
West central	9.2 (10)
Western	14.7 (16)

Table 2 School and employment characteristics of respondents

	% (n)
<i>Place of employment</i>	
Public school	82.6 (95)
Private school	2.6 (3)
Hospital or clinic	2.6 (3)
University or college	3.5 (4)
Other	8.7 (10)
<i>Locale</i>	
Urban	27.6 (32)
Suburban	31.0 (36)
Rural	19.8 (23)
Mixed	21.6 (25)
<i>Populations served</i>	
K-12, primarily preschool	3.5 (4)
K-12, primarily elementary	67.8 (78)
K-12, primarily middle school	2.6 (3)
K-12, primarily high school	26.1 (30)
<i>Enrollment</i>	
<300	15.1 (11.2)
301–999	58.1 (50)
1,000 or more	26.7 (23)

Descriptive Analysis of Kindergarten Transition Activities

School-Based Implementation

The majority of school psychologists (80.9 %) reported that their schools engaged in at least one kindergarten transition activity per year. The most frequently reported school-based implementation activities included providing caregivers with general information regarding kindergarten transition (97.8 %), evaluating children's performance during kindergarten (95.5 %), and reviewing kindergarten enrollment figures (92.2 %). The least frequently reported school-based implementation activities included creating advertisements regarding kindergarten enrollment (10 %), conducting home visits (20.2 %), and evaluating family functioning during kindergarten transition (27 %). Table 3 provides the descriptive results of the school-based implementation activities.

School Psychologists' Involvement

Half of the responding sample (52.2 %) reported being involved with at least one kindergarten transition activity per year, with less than half of the responding sample (38.9 %) reported receiving training in kindergarten transition activities. The most frequently reported activities that school psychologists' reported involvement included

Table 3 School-based implementation of, school psychologists' involvement, and school psychologists' desired involvement with kindergarten transition activities

Activity	School-based implementation		School psychologists' involvement		School psychologists' desired involvement	
	Yes % (n)	No % (n)	Yes % (n)	No % (n)	Yes % (n)	No % (n)
Creating advertisements	10.0 (67)	90.0 (23)	20.0 (9)	80.0 (81)	75.6 (18)	24.4 (72)
Conducting planning meetings	75.6 (68)	24.4 (22)	37.8 (34)	62.2 (56)	72.7 (64)	27.3 (24)
Reviewing enrollment figures	92.2 (83)	7.8 (7)	15.6 (14)	84.4 (76)	31.3 (28)	68.9 (62)
Assisting in determining class placements	83.3 (75)	16.7 (15)	41.1 (37)	58.9 (53)	73.9 (65)	26.1 (23)
Reviewing child records	83.3 (75)	16.7 (15)	46.1 (41)	53.9 (48)	77.3 (68)	22.7 (20)
Conducting screenings	32.6 (70)	67.4 (19)	72.7 (29)	27.3 (60)	79.8 (64)	20.2 (24)
Collaborating with preschool teachers	79.8 (71)	20.2 (18)	58.4 (52)	41.6 (37)	85.4 (76)	14.6 (13)
Collaborating with kindergarten teachers	87.6 (78)	12.4 (11)	67.4 (60)	32.5 (29)	87.1 (74)	15.9 (14)
Conducting open-houses	82.0 (73)	18.0 (16)	16.9 (15)	83.1 (74)	43.2 (24)	73.0 (65)
Providing caregivers with general information	97.8 (87)	2.2 (2)	13.5 (12)	86.5 (77)	23.6 (21)	76.4 (68)
Providing caregivers with specific information	89.9 (80)	10.1 (9)	16.9 (15)	83.1 (74)	36.0 (32)	64.0 (57)
Providing frequent communication	88.8 (79)	11.2 (10)	21.3 (19)	78.7 (70)	36.4 (32)	63.6 (56)
Evaluating child performance	95.5 (85)	4.5 (4)	46.1 (55)	53.9 (30)	64.7 (55)	35.3 (30)
Evaluating family functioning	27.0 (24)	73.0 (65)	15.7 (14)	84.3 (75)	59.1 (36)	40.9 (52)
Developing family support groups	28.1 (25)	71.9 (64)	12.4 (11)	87.6 (78)	51.1 (43)	48.9 (45)

conducting kindergarten screenings (72.7 %), collaborating with kindergarten teachers (67.4 %), and collaborating with preschool teachers (58.4 %). The least frequently reported activities were developing support groups for families of children transitioning to kindergarten (12.4 %), conducting home visits (13.5 %), and providing caregivers with general information regarding kindergarten transition. When school psychologists were asked to identify the activities they were most interested in being involved, the most frequently endorsed activities included collaborating with kindergarten teachers (87.1 %), collaborating with preschool teachers (85.4 %), and conducting kindergarten screenings (79.8 %). The least frequently endorsed activities included providing caregivers with general information regarding kindergarten transition (23.6 %), reviewing kindergarten enrollment figures (31.3 %), and providing caregivers with specific information regarding kindergarten transition (36.0 %). Table 3 provides the descriptive results of the school psychologists' implementation and desired implementation activities.

Barriers to Involvement

When school psychologists were asked to identify potential barriers to their involvement with kindergarten transition activities, the most frequently endorsed barrier (35.6 %) was that involvement in kindergarten transition activities was not considered part of their job description. The least frequently identified barrier (4.4 %) was limited interest in kindergarten transition activities. Table 4 presents the

Table 4 Barriers to school psychologists' involvement with kindergarten transition

Barrier	Yes % (n)
Not considered part of job description	35.6 (32)
Limited interest	4.4 (4)
Limited knowledge	6.7 (6)
Limited training	6.7 (6)
Other	10.3 (12)

descriptive results of the perceived barriers to school psychologists' involvement with kindergarten transition.

Exploratory Analyses of Factors Related to School Psychologists' Involvement with Kindergarten Transition Activities

In an attempt to explore whether demographic characteristics related to the participants' school sites were related to school psychologists' involvement with kindergarten transition activities, a series of one-way univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed. The dependent measure for these analyses was a school involvement composite score, which was computed based on the respondents' endorsement of 16 kindergarten transition activities. The results indicated statistically significant differences between school locale and the kindergarten transition composite score, $F(3, 86) = 3.57, p = .01$. Using the Scheffé Test, post hoc multiple comparisons were performed to evaluate

the sources of differences among the school locales. The results indicated that respondents were more likely to be involved with kindergarten transition activities if they worked in an urban school setting ($p < .05$; $M = 13.18$; $SD = 2.63$) than suburban ($M = 10.32$; $SD = 4.55$), rural ($M = 11.83$; $SD = 2.92$), or mixed ($M = 10.00$; $SD = 3.73$) school settings. In addition, the results indicated statistically significant differences between school size and the kindergarten transition composite score, $F(2, 82) = 10.14$, $p < .001$. Using the Scheffé Test, post hoc multiple comparisons were performed to evaluate the sources of differences among the school sizes, indicating that respondents were more likely to be involved with kindergarten transition activities if they worked in large (i.e., more than 1000 students) ($p < .001$; $M = 12.22$; $SD = 3.40$) or moderate-sized (i.e., 301–999 students) ($p < .001$; $M = 11.84$; $SD = 3.05$) schools than if they were worked in small (i.e., less than 300 students) ($M = 7.08$; $SD = 5.14$) school settings. Finally, there was no significant difference between school psychologists' kindergarten transition composite scores and the primary age group served, $F(2, 87) = 0.42$, $p = .66$. Similar levels of involvement were reported by school psychologists across preschool ($M = 9.00$; $SD = 0.00$), elementary ($M = 11.20$; $SD = 4.06$), and high school ($M = 11.52$; $SD = 3.47$) instructional levels.

Discussion

Kindergarten transition is viewed as an important developmental and educational milestone for young children, their families, and teachers; yet to date, this topic has received little empirical investigation. The purpose of this study was to examine school psychologists' involvement in kindergarten transition activities and perceived barriers to engage in kindergarten transition activities in a national sample of practitioners. In addition, the study explored whether demographic factors (i.e., school locale, school size) were related to school psychologists' involvement in kindergarten transition activities.

Findings from the current study suggest that approximately half (52 %) of school psychologist respondents were engaged in kindergarten transition activities for typically developing students. Although half of respondents (48 %) reported no involvement in transition programming, the majority of the sample indicated that they had an interest in participating in many transition activities (e.g., 72.7 % reported an interest in conducting planning meetings; 87.1 % reported an interest in collaborating with kindergarten teachers). In all instances, a larger proportion of school psychologists expressed an interest in transition programming than the percentage who reported actual involvement. This discrepancy between involvement and desire suggests that there may be barriers, other than interest, that interfere with school psychologist involvement.

Indeed, a third of respondents reported that kindergarten transition activities were not considered part of their job description. This may be due, in part, to school building assignments and responsibilities covering multiple schools within a geographical catchment area. Further, some school psychologists may be employed through intermediate agencies that contract with schools to provide special education assessments, thus limiting school psychologists' activities to testing for special services.

Another disparity between school psychologists' actual and desired practices was observed with their involvement in collaborating with teachers and families. A large percentage of respondents indicated that they were interested in collaborating with preschool teachers (85.4 %) and kindergarten teachers (87.1 %) regarding kindergarten transition activities. However, this same level of involvement was not observed when respondents reported their interest in working with families to provide general (23.6 %) or specific information (36 %) pertaining to kindergarten transition. This, in part, may be related to current school-based implementation practices, wherein a high percentage of school psychologists reported that their schools provide caregivers with general (97.8 %) and specific (89.9 %) kindergarten transition information.

General Limitations of the Study

The present study has several limitations that should be noted. First, although potential participants were randomly sampled from the NASP membership directory, there was no way to control for their roles and functions as school psychologists. As a result, a considerable number of respondents had not been involved with service delivery at an elementary school within the past 2 years and therefore were not included in the final analyses. Second, because all of the participants were members of NASP, it is plausible that the results are more representative of school psychologists who are NASP members rather than all school psychologists. Third, although nonparametric analyses suggested that respondents were relatively homogeneous with respect to demographic characteristics, a large percentage of respondents resided in either the Northeast or Southeast. As a result, the present findings may be more representative of school psychologists employed in these regions.

Recommendations and Implications for Future Practice

Although conclusions based on the current findings should be made with caution, the results suggest that school psychologists may be a valuable asset to kindergarten transition planning, particularly if they have the resources and administrative support to do so. This study is unique in that it is an empirical investigation of a national sample of

practicing school psychologists. The authors are not aware of other empirical investigations examining the role of school psychologists in kindergarten transition, and thus, future studies could build on these preliminary findings.

There has been a renewed interest in early childhood programming and school readiness, as evidenced by universal pre-kindergarten programs and state and federal initiatives. For example, the National Education Goals Panel (1997) stated that by the year 2000, all children will begin school ready to learn. Furthermore, schools will be ready to support a diverse group of learners (National Education Goals Panel 1998). School psychologists and other educational professionals may be called upon to coordinate school screenings, collaborate with early childhood personnel, and work with families to prepare children for elementary school (Barnett 1986; McIntyre et al. 2007). School psychologists and other educational professionals are in a unique position to contribute to kindergarten transition planning because of their background in assessment, intervention, consultation, counseling, and problem-solving (Schakel 1988); however, results from the present study suggest that school psychologists may be underutilized in this role.

Few published journal articles have evaluated the role of school psychologists in early childhood education and transition to kindergarten activities, and none have been empirical investigations. With some exceptions (e.g., Gredler 2000), many of the articles published on this topic are 20 or more years old (e.g., Barnett 1986; Lapidès 1977; Schakel 1988) and may not reflect current educational practices and priorities. Indeed, the role of the school psychologist and other educational professionals has changed with recent special education (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act 2004) and general education legislation (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education 2002). Given the renewed interest in early childhood education, as well as national priorities involving pre-referral intervention and problem-solving, it is anticipated that school psychologists and other educational professionals will become more active participants in planning for and coordinating kindergarten transition activities. Additional research is needed to evaluate how best school psychologists may contribute to these activities.

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