The different impact of preschoolers’ everyday activities and interactions on perceptions of their academic competence after starting school: Data from the United States, Russia, and Estonia

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Introduction

Introduction to the theory and methods
The activities and interactions in which children engage
Activities perhaps related to later academic competence
Examining the links between these activities and interactions when the children are three and how they are doing in school when they are 8 and 9
Examples from the United States, Russia, and Estonia

Cultural-ecological theory
(a contextualist theory based on the theories of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner)
The everyday activities and interactions in which individuals engage, that vary by aspects of:
   The active individuals involved (age, gender, temperament, motivations, experiences, interests, values, beliefs, etc.)
   Those who are the focus of attention
   Those who interact with them on a regular basis
The context
   The immediate setting (home, child care, workplace, etc.)
   More distal settings, of which culture is the most important
Over time
   Studying development over time
   Situating the research in historical time

Acting and interacting
Typically occurring activities and interactions
How they take place
What is considered appropriate; what is inappropriate?
Who is encouraged; who is discouraged?
Who engages with whom?

What the individual brings
Age
Gender
Temperament
Motivation
Past experience with the activity
Past experience with the others engaged in that activity

Context
Local context
   Home (including conditions), child care or school, peer group, etc.
Culture
   A group sharing values, beliefs, practices, institutions, resources, sense of identity, desire to pass them down to the next generation
   Society, ethnicity, social class, region, rural-urban differences
Participants

- 157 children from 28-45 months (at Time 1), and their parents.
  - 40* from Greensboro, NC, USA (Sarah Putnam, Judy Sidden, Fabienne Doucet, Nicole Talley)
  - 22* from Obninsk, Russia (Natalia Kulakova, Irina Snezhkova)
  - 18 from Oulu, Finland (Marina Kontio, Johanna Matinmikko)
  - 20 from Tartu, Estonia (Marika Meltsas, Peeter Tammeveski)
  - 20 from Kisumu, Kenya (Dolphine Odero)
  - 25 from Porto Alegre, Brazil (Fernanda Martins, Rafael Spinelli, Giana Frizzo), part of the Porto Alegre Longitudinal Study (Piccinini, Tudge, Lopes, & Sperb, 1998)

- Cities of medium size
- Half of the families in each city were middle class (by education and occupation), half working class

Observations of everyday activities

- 20 hours of observations of each child.
- Observations occurred in 2- or 4-hour blocks over the course of a week, in such a way as to “capture” every waking hour.
- Real-time coding, every 6 minutes, of 30-second “windows.”
- Coded children’s activities, partners, roles, initiation of activities, etc.
- Observations at home, childcare, shopping, with friends, etc.

Focal activities

- Lessons
  - academic, interpersonal, skill/nature
- Work
- Play (including exploration and entertainment)
- Conversation
- Other (non-focal activities)

Activities possibly relevant to later academic competence

- Academic lessons
  - explicit attempt to request or receive information on literacy, numeracy, etc.
- Skill/Nature lessons
  - requesting or receiving information related to how to do things (tying shoelaces, operating the VCR), or to the workings of the natural world, or about health and safety.
- Play with academic objects
  - the object has academic relevance, but no explicit lesson involved.
- Conversation with one or more adults

Developmental outcome

(Times 2, 3...)

- Assessments, once children were in school, of academic and social competence (from SSRS, Gresham & Elliott, 1990):
  - teachers
  - parents
- Interviews
  - teachers
  - parents

Mean engagement in activities, by city and class

- US mid
- US work
- R mid
- R work
- E mid
- E work
Mean engagement in activities, by city and class

Mean initiation of activities, by city and social class

Teachers’ subsequent perception of academic competence

Correlations of preschool engagement in activities with teachers’ subsequent perceptions of competence (US data only)

Correlations of preschool engagement in activities with teachers’ subsequent perceptions of competence (US and Russia)

Some Russian parents’ views

A mother, working as a cleaner: “I don’t trust our government. I think they are highly incompetent...I am disappointed in the State; I had never dreamed my life would be so hard. So I tell [my son] all the time that he should learn and learn. I still hope things will turn for the better.” Her son’s teacher “is attentive and strict. She makes them work a lot, and the children learn well... She is stricter than mine had been. His teacher uses play at the lessons, but the children stay quiet. They have freedom at break.”
A middle-class mother, making four times as much money as the cleaner: “This school allows the parents a choice of programmes for their child. ... While with the usual kind of programme the teacher explains to the pupil all he needs to know, here the way to teach is to pose a problem before the child, and to do it in such a way that the child arrives at the solution himself or with the help of the teacher. The child goes all the way himself; he is not led by the hand.”

Correlations of preschool engagement in activities with teachers’ subsequent perceptions of competence (US and Estonia)

Correlations (Spearman rho)

-0.8
-0.6
-0.4
-0.2
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8

Acad
Skill/nat.
Less
Academic
Conv. w/ adults

Estonian parents’ views

Now it is quite crazy what the parents sometimes undertake to put their child into any of these elite schools. I feel sorry for these kids. I have heard that some parents put their children into ordinary school for one year and then try to send them to the first class of elite school. This is what I have heard. The competition is in some sense good. But I do not know how these children survive that. [Father of a middle class girl (96-f KRd)]

This is the closest school to our home and in principle I am against establishing of these elite schools. The child is so unaware in the beginning and the parents are so unaware, nobody can predict what the child is really interested in or is she talented … this is a sport or competition among the parents. I simply chose the school, which was the nearest to home. [Father of a middle class girl (96-f, KRn)]

First we thought that we put her in this school [Catholic, also has entrance exams] only for one year when she is so young and after that we planned to send her to competition to enter the first class in Miina Härma School (most prestigious school in Tartu). [Mother of middle class girl (94-f KH)]

She had to take the tests and she did them very well. She had to prove herself especially. There has been quite high competition to this school during last years.

Did anyone help prepare her?

My father used to teach her math before the school. When [she] stayed with her grandparents, her grandfather had a sort of hobby to teach her math.

Was she mature enough for school?

First I thought that she was. But when she was already there I felt that she wasn’t in fact. ... There was a crisis in January. She had a real school stress then. I recognized it perhaps because I have taken some psychology courses last year. Otherwise I could not associate it with school... This was expressed by somatic problems. It happened regularly that on Monday mornings she was vomiting. It lasted for two months. At last I went to child psychotherapist. We had the counseling 3 times. And I think that we really got help. [Mother of middle class girl (92-f)]

I think that the main goal is the same, to provide the children education, so that they can find the appropriate job for themselves. The problem now is that you may graduate from school, but you can find a good job only when you have received a really good education. In the past we did not have such problems, with secondary education you could always find some job. The problem of finding a job has become very serious nowadays. You need to have acquaintances... [Father of working class boy (106-m MR)]

Some children come to school in very expensive trendy clothes and the others have what they just happen to have at home to put on. It causes big stratification and even belonging to different groups. The children of those recently enriched people and those who have nothing. This background becomes evident. If there were school uniform there would not be such big contrasts. [Father of working class girl (109-f)]

Conclusions

- Variations in children’s activities and interactions, influenced simultaneously by context and individual society
- Social class
- Children’s own initiation of activities
- Consequences for development?
- Yes, but clearly vary by the society at a specific period of historical time
Thanks for your attention!

Questions???


Various papers and presentations can be downloaded from:

www.uncg.edu/hdf/facultystaff/Tudge/Tudge.html