

**School's Cool Program: An Effective Transition
Program for Young Children in Various
Sociocultural Contexts**

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School readiness and pre-school education have received a great deal of attention since it is clear that the transition to kindergarten is crucial to children's future success in school (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). However, preparing children for school is a significant challenge by educators (Stormshak, Kaminski, & Goodman, 2002), especially with the growing ethnic diversity and immigrant population in the classrooms. Researchers have reported that early learning environments play a key role in promoting children's individual, social, cognitive, and language development. The social and contextual environment that is provided to children will greatly impact children's attainment of school readiness skills and abilities (Winter, Zurcher, Hernandea, & Yin, 2007).

However, with the increasing rise of children from lower SES, early learning programs may not be financially feasible. Also, research has shown that immigrant families are less likely to enroll their children in center-based care (e.g., see Brandon, 2004). To address these needs, SIRCH Community Services and Consulting developed a 72-hour transition program for young children. However, can a short-term program be an effective program that will build the necessary developmental skills and competencies that children will need to transition smoothly to kindergarten? The purpose of this report was two-fold: 1) to evaluate the program; and 2) to examine the relevancy and effectiveness of this program among various cultural groups (i.e., Aboriginals, immigrants).

School's Cool Program

Created in 1998, the School's Cool program was developed with the goals of creating an effective transition-to-school program for children, ages 3 to 5 years. The program includes 122 activities that are specifically targeted at improving children's development in five areas: social, psychological, language, self-help and math competencies (see Appendix A for items). The curriculum was designed to explicitly link play experiences with observable learning outcomes that are relevant to skills needed for a solid foundation for kindergarten. The School's Cool program not only focuses on the cognitive aspects of the academic curriculum (e.g., math, language) but also promotes effective transitions into the school environment (e.g., helping them adapt to classroom routines, socialize with peers).

Method

A total of 3001 children participated in the study, including 1145 three-year olds (539 girls), 1520 four-year olds (694 girls), and 336 five-year olds (139 girls) from three provinces of Canada (96% were from Ontario, 1.9% from British Columbia, and 2.1% from Manitoba). Children were divided into three groups, with mean ages of 3.71, 4.37, and 5.35 years of age, respectively (*SDs* = .20, .25, .24, respectively). Most of the children were from intact families with biological parents (3 year olds = 81.0%; 4 year olds = 79.6%; 5 year olds = 69.9%)

In the age 3 group, participants included 1002 (471 girls) native, non-Aboriginal Canadians (NNAB), 99 (50 girls) Aboriginals (AB), and 46 (22 girls) immigrant (IM) children. The age 4 group included 1326 (597 girls) NNAB, 131 (58 girls) AB, and 59 (28 girls) IM. The age 5 group included 276 (110 girls) NNAB, 39 (21 girls) AB, and 20 (8 girls) IM.

Children participated in 24 sessions (3 hour sessions) that were age appropriate. At the beginning of the program, children engaged in a series of activities so that the trained program evaluators/teachers could assess each child's levels of skills/competencies across five types of skills: social, psychological, language, self-help, and math (pre-test scores). At the end of the program, the same program evaluators re-assessed each child (post-test scores). Each child was assessed by two or three teachers who jointly agreed on each score.

Measures

To assess children's levels of skills in five developmental areas (social, psychological, language, self-help, and math), a checklist was created where each step was equivalent to a 1 year increment (see Appendix A for checklist and scoring). *Social* skills included 6 items on the child's various social interactions with his/her peers. *Psychological* skills focused on psychological/individual aspects, such as the degree to which the child can regulate or control his/her own emotions and behaviours outside the presence of adults, and self-recognition (being able to recognize that the child is separate from others) (8 items). *Language* skills had 11 items that assessed children's language and communication abilities from story comprehension to labeling familiar objects to communicating information to others. *Self-Help* skills focused on the text to which the child was able to be self-reliant, able to do things on his/her own (4 items). *Math* skills on numeracy, patterns, numerical concepts such as time, were based on 6 items.

The first step to ensure that each of the skill constructs (social, psychological, language, self-help, math) are internally consistent (each item is measuring the same idea), internal reliabilities were conducted for each construct. Internal consistencies for each of the scales were very high for all of the scales in each of the three age groups (all α s above .80).

Results

Part I: Is the program effective?

The first objective was to examine whether the School's Cool program was an effective program for the children in the three age groups: 3, 4, and 5 years of age. In order to statistically conclude whether the program was effective in each of the age groups, a series of 2 (Child's gender) X 2 (Test: pretest, posttest) repeated measures ANOVAs, with Test treated as the repeated measure, were conducted for each age group. Next, further detailed exploration of the scores in each of the Skills were examined by employing a series of 2 (Child's gender) X 2 (Test: pretest, posttest) X 5 (Skill: social, psychological, language, self-help and math) repeated measures MANOVAs, with Test treated as the repeated measures. These analyses systematically compared children's scores at two time points, before (pretest) and

after the program (posttest), to determine whether children qualitatively improved over the course of this program.

As seen in Table 1, the series of analyses revealed a consistent pattern across all three age groups: a main effect for Test (significant difference between posttest and pretest scores) and gender (with girls having significantly higher scores at the pretest and posttest assessments). A series of analyses were also conducted to specifically test for levels of improvement for each Skill. Similar to the overall assessment, children across all three groups significantly improved in each of the skills.

Part 2: Is the program effective for all cultural groups?

To examine whether the School's Cool program is effective for all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, the series of analyses were conducted in Part 1 was re-run separately for three cultural groups: 1) native, non-Aboriginals (NNA); 2) Aboriginals (AB); and 3) immigrants (IM). The three analyses revealed that for all cultural groups, children across all ages significantly benefited from the School's Cool program. A second set of analyses to examine within each Skill also revealed that regardless of ethnicity or gender, children significantly improved over the course of the program (see Tables 2 and 3).

Discussion

The present study examines the effectiveness of a 72-hour transition-to-school program among various ethnic populations. Using developmentally appropriate curriculum that is both play-based and outcome-focused, School's Cool program has been found to promote children's intrinsic motivation for learning and builds their skills and competencies to be successful as they transition to formal schooling. The program is culturally sensitive to immigrant and other ethnic minority children, ensuring that all children strengthen their developmental skills. While other programs such as Head Start and center-based programs/childcares are effective, this study provides some insight into how shorter programs may be able to just as effectively ensure that children will have a smooth and "seamless" transition to kindergarten.

Some of the findings, however, need to be taken with caution due to sample sizes for the 5-year old Aboriginal and immigrant children. While the sample is smaller than ideal, the patterns are positive and are consistent with levels of improvement overall.

Future Directions

The number of children who have enrolled in the School's Cool Program is impressive and the impact on children is invaluable to their future academic success. For next steps, it is important to place the School's Cool program within an ecological perspective which will theoretically ground the findings. Using an ecological perspective will inform service providers, educators, and parents of the importance of relationships that children have in their social world, such as parents, siblings, peers, neighbourhood contexts, will directly and indirectly influence their academic success. For example, as past research has found, children who are at risk for behavioral problems, conduct disorders, aggressive behaviours, have been associated with

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transitional points in development like children entering school. Parents, as well as programs just as School's Cool Program, can ameliorate these transitional stress points. Consistently found, family involvement in education has been linked to children's academic performance. Thus, fostering family-school partnerships have been seen as crucial, especially for children at risk (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

School's Cool actively engages parents in their children's progress. Daily contact and/or weekly newsletters help parents understand the skills needed in kindergarten and promote their involvement in their children's education. Parent sessions help parents frame teachers and school as a positive experience, and familiarize parents with what to expect. Future directions would be to capture the extent to which parents' conceptions and views about school may change over the course of the program. Also, it would be of great interest and importance to methodological track the extent to which parents' levels of involvement increases over time. As studies have shown, parental involvement in their children's schooling and more broadly, everyday life, not only promotes children's competencies but also builds better relationships with their children which is crucial for their psychological well-being.

Through parents' comments throughout the course of School's Cool, we were able to tap into how School's Cool has changed their conceptions about schooling and their integral role in their children's academic success. For example, one parent who had negative personal school experiences which resulted in her lack of school involvement with her older child (e.g., teacher-parent meetings, school activities), placed her younger child in School's Cool. In the course of School's Cool and the high level of teachers' initiative in engaging parents in their children's academic performance, the mother not only volunteered in the school but participated on the Parent Council. This would not have happened without the School's Cool philosophy and parent-as well and child-focused framework.

Thus, transitions to kindergarten are critical moments in children's lives which can alter their developmental trajectories (Stormshak, Kaminski, & Goodman, 2002). When children enter kindergarten, the new demands can place stress on children's psychological and social competencies. Such demands include skills in independence and self-reliance, positive peer relationships, adherence to classroom rules and regulations, being alert and active for longer periods of time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). With School's Cool program, children learn to build their competencies and skills to ensure that they can cope with the transition, and maximize their learning.

References

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Table I

Children's Mean Pre-test and Post-test Scores on Five Developmental Skills by Gender

Pre-/Post Test/ Skill	Gender/Age group								
	Girls			Boys			Total		
	3	4	5	3	4	5	3	4	5
Pre-test									
Social	3.96 (.76)	4.25 (.77)	4.85 (.79)	3.66 (.74)	4.06 (.76)	4.46 (.90)	3.80 (.76)	4.15 (.77)	4.62 (.87)
Psychological	4.05 (.72)	4.34 (.68)	4.95 (.72)	3.77 (.70)	4.14 (.70)	4.52 (.81)	0.90 (.73)	4.23 (.70)	4.70 (.80)
Language	3.91 (.72)	4.30 (.75)	5.02 (.75)	3.59 (.74)	4.07 (.76)	4.56 (.88)	3.74 (.75)	4.17 (.77)	4.75 (.86)
Self-help	3.73 (.69)	4.09 (.73)	4.73 (.80)	3.54 (.70)	3.90 (.74)	4.40 (.88)	3.63 (.70)	3.99 (.74)	4.54 (.86)
Math	3.64 (.74)	4.03 (.79)	4.81 (.79)	3.39 (.74)	3.86 (.81)	4.40 (.92)	3.51 (.75)	3.94 (.81)	4.57 (.89)
Total	3.86 (.65)	4.20 (.67)	4.88 (.70)	3.59 (.65)	4.01 (.68)	4.47 (.81)	3.72 (.66)	4.10 (.68)	4.64 (.79)
Post-test									
Social	5.02 (.66)	5.21 (.61)	5.53 (.57)	4.79 (.73)	5.11 (.78)	5.29 (.69)	4.90 (.71)	5.16 (.71)	5.39 (.65)
Psychological	5.00 (.61)	5.21 (.64)	5.49 (.57)	4.79 (.73)	5.07 (.64)	5.29 (.76)	4.89 (.69)	5.13 (.65)	5.37 (.69)
Language	4.90 (.65)	5.21 (.64)	5.57 (.56)	4.62 (.73)	5.02 (.72)	5.33 (.63)	4.75 (.70)	5.11 (.69)	5.43 (.61)
Self-help	4.85 (.60)	5.10 (.57)	5.43 (.58)	4.62 (.66)	4.92 (.64)	5.13 (.62)	4.73 (.64)	5.00 (.62)	5.26 (.62)
Math	4.70 (.74)	5.04 (.69)	5.49 (.60)	4.49 (.79)	4.92 (.75)	5.27 (.64)	4.60 (.77)	4.97 (.73)	5.36 (.63)
Total	4.90 (.58)	5.15 (.54)	5.50 (.53)	4.66 (.65)	5.01 (.61)	5.26 (.59)	4.77 (.63)	5.07 (.59)	5.36 (.58)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

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Table 2

Children's Mean Pre-test and Post-test Scores on Five Developmental Skills by Ethnic Group

Pre-/Post Test/ Skill	Ethnic group/Age group								
	Native, non-Aboriginal			Aboriginal			Immigrant		
	3	4	5	3	4	5	3	4	5
Pre-test									
Social	3.81 (.76)	4.17 (.77)	4.64 (.88)	3.87 (.80)	4.00 (.71)	4.52 (.73)	3.62 (.80)	3.97 (.77)	4.39 (1.09)
Psychological	3.91 (.72)	4.25 (.69)	4.70 (.80)	4.01 (.75)	4.15 (.73)	4.72 (.83)	3.62 (.75)	3.92 (.84)	4.62 (.95)
Language	3.75 (.74)	4.19 (.76)	4.77 (.84)	3.83 (.72)	4.18 (.76)	4.71 (1.01)	3.45 (.91)	3.86 (.89)	4.74 (.98)
Self-help	3.63 (.69)	4.01 (.73)	4.57 (.87)	3.72 (.72)	3.96 (.76)	4.30 (.88)	3.35 (.81)	3.62 (.80)	4.46 (.92)
Math	3.39 (.71)	3.96 (.79)	4.58 (.87)	3.49 (.82)	3.82 (.90)	4.51 (1.03)	3.22 (.87)	3.68 (.86)	4.54 (1.03)
Total	3.72 (.65)	4.12 (.67)	4.66 (.78)	3.78 (.69)	4.00 (.70)	4.55 (.80)	3.44 (.79)	3.84 (.77)	4.55 (.94)
Post-test									
Social	4.92 (.69)	5.18 (.71)	5.39 (.65)	4.77 (.79)	5.04 (.64)	5.40 (.58)	4.77 (.69)	5.04 (.75)	5.23 (.88)
Psychological	4.91 (.68)	5.13 (.60)	5.35 (.61)	4.77 (.70)	5.14 (.95)	5.48 (1.15)	4.78 (.60)	5.07 (.97)	5.30 (.72)
Language	4.78 (.68)	5.12 (.68)	5.42 (.60)	4.68 (.77)	5.14 (.80)	5.44 (.74)	4.47 (.86)	4.84 (.82)	5.45 (.61)
Self-help	4.74 (.63)	5.00 (.61)	5.25 (.64)	4.75 (.68)	5.10 (.59)	5.35 (.60)	4.58 (.65)	4.87 (.71)	5.16 (.64)
Math	4.63 (.75)	5.00 (.71)	5.36 (.56)	4.32 (.85)	4.86 (.74)	5.36 (.79)	4.36 (.89)	4.82 (.84)	5.32 (.71)
Total	4.79 (.62)	5.09 (.58)	5.29 (.60)	4.66 (.68)	5.08 (.57)	5.41 (.64)	4.59 (.68)	4.84 (.72)	5.29 (.66)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

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Table 3

Children's Mean Levels of Improvement in Five Developmental Skills by Ethnic Group

Skill	Ethnic group/Age group								
	Native, non-Aboriginal			Aboriginal			Immigrant		
	3	4	5	3	4	5	3	4	5
Social	1.12 (.71)	1.01 (.74)	0.76 (.62)	0.91 (.74)	1.04 (.62)	0.88 (.51)	1.20 (.67)	1.07 (.82)	0.84 (.71)
Psychological	1.01 (.67)	0.88 (.59)	0.66 (.55)	0.75 (.69)	0.99 (1.08)	0.75 (1.16)	1.19 (.63)	1.15 (.90)	0.68 (.61)
Language	1.03 (.58)	0.93 (.56)	0.66 (.59)	0.86 (.65)	0.97 (.73)	0.73 (.52)	1.06 (.57)	0.98 (.67)	0.71 (.66)
Self-help	1.11 (.69)	1.00 (.64)	0.68 (.70)	1.03 (.83)	1.14 (.79)	1.05 (.67)	1.27 (.66)	1.25 (.77)	0.69 (.77)
Math	1.11 (.66)	1.04 (.64)	0.79 (.63)	0.82 (.63)	1.04 (.69)	0.85 (.59)	1.20 (.73)	1.05 (.68)	0.81 (.84)
Total	1.08 (.55)	0.97 (.51)	.71 (.53)	0.88 (.65)	1.08 (.63)	0.85 (.47)	1.18 (.56)	1.00 (.55)	0.74 (.63)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

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