



# Improving teacher-child interactions: A randomized controlled trial of Making the Most of Classroom Interactions and My Teaching Partner professional development models<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of two professional development interventions, each designed to strengthen teacher-child interactions in preschool classrooms, was tested using a teacher-level randomized controlled trial. Georgia's Pre-K teachers ( $n = 486$  in 336 schools/centers) were randomly selected from specified regions and randomly assigned to one of three conditions: 1) Making the Most of Classroom Interactions (MMCI), a cohort-model where small groups of teachers met for five days of instruction and support; 2) My Teaching Partner (MTP), in which teachers worked one-on-one with a coach using cycles of videotaped observations of teaching, review, and feedback; or 3) control. Each participating teacher received a Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; *Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008*) visit before and after the intervention from a trained, independent, blinded observer. Posttest scores were estimated as a linear function of condition and pretest score, using 2-level hierarchical linear models (HLMs). Findings indicated MMCI resulted in significantly higher posttest scores on Emotional Support and Instructional Support, and marginally higher posttest scores on Classroom Organization, as compared to controls. MTP resulted in significantly higher scores on Emotional Support. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for large-scale interventions to improve teacher-child interactions in early childhood programs.

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## 1. Introduction

Improving quality in early childhood classrooms is a primary goal of many state and federal initiatives. For instance, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge was designed to support “states in building statewide systems that raise the quality of Early Learning and Development Programs and increase access to high-quality programs for children with high needs, so that all children enter

kindergarten ready to succeed” (*Early Learning Challenge Technical Assistance Program, n.d.*). Over 35 states have established Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (TQRIS) as a framework for defining quality and supporting improvement in early childhood classroom quality (*QRIS Compendium, n.d.*). This focus on improving quality comes from an ever-increasing understanding that quality is important for maximizing the benefits of early childhood programs in terms of children's early social and academic skills and that quality is, on average, lower than desirable (*Love et al., 2003; Mashburn et al., 2008; Moiduddin, Aikens, Tarullo, West, & Xue, 2012; Yoshikawa et al., 2013*). The current study used a randomized-controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of two professional development models for improving classroom quality (My Teaching Partner and Making the Most of Classroom Interactions) in Georgia's Pre-K program, a large, state-funded pre-kindergarten system. This study represents a collaboration between Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) and researchers who were independent of the model developers.

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<sup>1</sup> Deceased. In memory of Dr. Yi Pan who cared deeply about the provision of quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children worldwide. The co-authors are greatly saddened by the loss of a friend and colleague.

### 1.1. High-quality teacher-child interactions

Within the global construct of classroom quality, teacher-child interactions have emerged as a key aspect of quality in predicting children's outcomes. Teacher-child interactions are the "daily back-and-forth exchanges that teachers and children have with one another throughout each day, including those that are social and instructional in nature" (p. 89, Hamre et al., 2012). Increasingly strong evidence indicates that the quality of these interactions, more than other aspects of classroom quality, is critical for improving children's early academic and social-emotional skills. For instance, Howes et al. (2008) found that "effective teaching," defined as sensitive interactions with adults around instructional content within a positive climate, was a stronger predictor of children's language and literacy outcomes than materials or activities. Using the same data, Mashburn et al. (2008) found that instructional support—or the quality of teacher-child interactions specific to instruction—was a stronger predictor of children's academic outcomes at the end of pre-k than structural features of quality such as teacher education, class size, ratio, and provision of comprehensive services. Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, and Curby (2009) found that teacher-child interactions were indirectly linked to children's reading skills through classroom engagement.

Turning to socio-emotional outcomes, efforts to help early childhood teachers build nurturing relationships with children have been linked to decreased externalizing and internalizing behavior in children (Perry, Allen, Brennan, & Bradley, 2010). Likewise, training teachers in foundational relationship skills has been linked to teacher-reports of increased positive and decreased negative child behavior among children who had below average social skills at baseline (Garbacz, Zychinski, Feuer, Carter, & Budd, 2014).

In a summary of the evidence base for the benefits of preschool education, Yoshikawa et al. (2013) underscored the importance of teacher-child interactions that are warm, responsive, and support learning. The important role of teachers' interactions is further reflected in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement, with explicit assertions such as, "Effective teachers are intentional in their use of a variety of approaches and strategies to support interest and ability in each learning domain" and "Curriculum is very important, but what the teacher does is paramount" (NAEYC, 2009).

### 1.2. Classroom Assessment Scoring System as a measure of teacher-child interactions

The most widely used measure of teacher-child interactions in early childhood classrooms is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). The CLASS has become part of the federal system for monitoring Head Start (Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.) and is increasingly included in states' QRIS (QRIS Compendium, n.d.). The CLASS tool includes 10 dimensions of teacher-child interactions that are organized into three broad domains—Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support—each of which has been linked to children's academic or social outcomes (Curby et al., 2009; Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009).

Using a variety of measures, there is mounting evidence that quality in publically funded early childhood programs is low (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Focusing specifically on the CLASS, research has documented the relatively low quality of teacher-child interactions, especially instructional support. An 11-state study of state funded pre-k found average instructional support was in the low range ( $mean = 2.1$  out of 7; Mashburn et al., 2008), as did a national study of Head Start ( $mean = 2.3$ ; Moiduddin et al.,

2012). Research in Georgia's Pre-K programs found similar results ( $mean = 2.5$ ; Peisner-Feinberg, Schaaf, Hildebrandt, & Pan, 2015).

### 1.3. Changing teacher behavior through effective professional development

Knowing that teacher-child interactions are crucial in supporting children's development and learning, the challenge is to improve teacher-child interactions. Research in early childhood education generally indicates that effective professional development combines specific training on novel skills, coupled with in-service coaching or consultation (Sheridan, Pope Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). Such professional development has been shown to be effective in improving instruction and children's outcomes in targeted content areas such as literacy (Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, & Koehler, 2010; Wasik & Hindman, 2011; Landry, Swank, & Assel, 2010) and math (Clements, Sarama, Spitler, Lange, & Wolfe, 2011).

The current work focuses on teacher-child interactions more generally, rather than focusing on a content area. In this arena, there are several prominent approaches that combine skills training with coaching/consultation and have been linked to improved teacher-child interactions and children's outcomes. Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) is one such approach in which mental health professionals work with early childhood teachers to improve classroom climate and classroom management, teach social skills, and address individual children's behavioral and mental health challenges (Duran et al., n.d.). Although ECMCH is not a single, prescribed intervention, there are tools, resources, and modules available for teaching specific skills and all ECMCH models include one-on-one consultation. ECMCH has been linked to improved classroom climate (Brennan, Bradley, Allen, & Perry, 2008; Raver et al., 2008). Further, ECMHC has been consistently linked to reduced externalizing behavior and occasionally linked to reduced internalizing behavior and improved prosocial behavior (Perry et al., 2010).

Teacher-Child Interaction Training (TCIT) is another approach to improving classroom climate that pairs skills training and consultation. TCIT uses both didactic instruction and behavioral coaching with teachers in the classroom to improve communication, behavior management, and prevention strategies for children with difficult behaviors. Correlational data suggest that TCIT is linked to decreased behavioral concerns for all children and improved social skills for children whose social skills were low at baseline (Garbacz et al., 2014).

The current study evaluates two professional development models that couple skills training with in-service coaching or consultation: My Teaching Partner (MTP) and Making the Most of Classroom Interactions (MMCI). Both were developed by the CLASS authors to support teachers in improving teacher-child interactions; however neither involves specific instruction on scoring the CLASS or improving CLASS scores. These approaches differ from ECMCH or TCIT in that they focus on instructional support, as well as classroom climate and management.

#### 1.3.1. Making the Most of Classroom Interactions

MMCI is a face-to-face professional development model in which a group of teachers meets regularly with trained instructors to learn to identify and analyze effective interactions in classrooms and discuss ways to interact intentionally to increase children's learning. Enrolled teachers have access to print and web-based resources aligned with the CLASS measure. Between in-person sessions, teachers complete homework assignments that involve watching specific videos and practicing interactions in the classroom and have access to an online library of video clips demonstrating best practices in various aspects of teacher-child

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