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An investigation of preschool classroom behavioral adjustment problems and social–emotional school readiness competencies

John W. Fantuzzo^{a,*}, Rebecca Bulotsky-Shearer^b,
Rachel A. Fusco^a, Christine McWayne^c

^a *University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216, USA*

^b *School District of Philadelphia, PA, USA*

^c *New York University, Steinhardt School of Education, NY, USA*

Abstract

The study examined the unique relationship between multiple dimensions of classroom behavioral adjustment problems and salient social–emotional competencies for urban Head Start children. These relationships were investigated using a hierarchical model that controlled for the variance in social–emotional outcomes attributed to age, gender, and verbal ability. Classroom behavioral adjustment problems were assessed early in the year by the Adjustment Scales for Preschool Intervention (ASPI) across multiple, routine preschool classroom situations. Outcomes assessed at the end of the year included emotion regulation, peer play in the home and neighborhood context, and approaches to learning. Socially negative behavior in the classroom predicted emotional lability, maladaptive learning behaviors, and disruptive social play in the home at the end of the year. Withdrawn behavior uniquely predicted lower affective engagement in the classroom and disconnection from peers in the home context. Findings provide predictive validity for the ASPI. Implications for policy, practice and future research are discussed.

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Recently, much national attention has been paid to the contribution of social and emotional readiness to children's school success (National Education Goals Panel, 1997; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2001). Research documents the negative influence of social, regulatory, and emotional problems on children's early school experiences (Knitzer, 2003; Raver, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Preschool children who exhibit challenges in these areas are more likely to experience

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 215 898 4790.

E-mail address: johnf@gse.upenn.edu (J.W. Fantuzzo).

difficulties within the classroom that affect their ability to develop normal peer relationships and to behave in ways conducive to learning (Vaughn et al., 1992). As a consequence, these children are less likely to be socially and academically prepared for school (Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000).

Unfortunately, epidemiological studies indicate that as many as 10–15% of preschool children exhibit moderate to clinically significant emotional and behavioral difficulties (Lavigne et al., 1996; Qi & Kaiser, 2003). At highest risk for these problems, are low-income children who are disproportionately exposed to risks to their health and well being (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; McLoyd, 1998). For these children, the prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems is even higher (Lavigne et al., 1996; Sinclair, Del'Homme, & Gonzalez, 1993). Further, children living in disadvantaged urban areas are at heightened risk for school adjustment difficulties. They are less likely to enter school systems with adequate resources to meet their educational and social–emotional needs (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

The occurrence of classroom behavioral adjustment problems in low-income, preschool children is best understood from a developmental psychopathology perspective (Cicchetti & Sroufe, 2000). Two principles exemplify this model: (a) the importance of understanding the influence of early patterns of adaptation on later development and (b) the recognition that child functioning is influenced by important proximal contexts such as school and home (Cicchetti & Sroufe, 2000). According to a developmental psychopathology perspective, children's developmental trajectories are influenced by early patterns of adjustment. All children have the potential to set out on a positive developmental course; however, early difficulties place children at risk for future problems. In addition, classroom behavioral adjustment problems are viewed as arising in dynamic transaction between children and the demands of primary contexts (Cicchetti & Sroufe, 2000). Therefore, it is critically important to study young children's behavior problems within proximal contexts, such as the preschool classroom and home.

In line with this developmental perspective, a growing body of research documents the negative influence of early behavior problems on children's academic and social outcomes. A review of the literature provides evidence from a number of longitudinal studies that behavior problems identified in the preschool years are often stable and lead to additional problems within the school classroom (Qi & Kaiser, 2003). Other research indicates that children with early behavioral problems experience difficulties interacting with teachers, parents and peers, and engaging in classroom learning activities (Harden et al., 2000; Olson & Hoza, 1993).

While current studies highlight the negative influence of preschool emotional and behavioral problems, these study findings are limited for low-income preschool children. First, behavior problems are frequently not studied or assessed within naturalistic settings such as the preschool classroom. Second, available tools used to assess classroom behavioral adjustment problems often lack reliability or validity for low-income preschool populations (Lopez, Tarullo, Forness, & Boyce, 2000). Commonly used methods, such as psychiatric checklists of mental disorders, have come under criticism for use with diverse, low-income populations because of their illness orientation and lack of contextual sensitivity (Drotar, Stein, & Perrin, 1995; Fantuzzo & Mohr, 2000; Sherrod, 1999). Empirical studies indicate that early childhood educators, particularly those serving low-income children, underreport classroom behavioral adjustment problems when using these types of measures to avoid stigmatizing children with labels that are not associated with needed classroom-based services (Mallory & Kearns, 1998).

In response to the need for reliable and valid assessment of problems within the classroom, McDermott (1993) developed an alternative approach to assessing children's classroom behavioral adjustment problems. Recently, this method was used to develop the Adjustment Scales for Preschool Intervention (ASPI) a measure to assess low-income children being served in early childhood programs (Lutz, Fantuzzo, &

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