



“Giant Leap 1”: A Social and Emotional Learning program's effects on the transition to first grade[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed how student characteristics influenced the effects of a Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program implemented in the first grade. A total of 14 teachers and 228 children participated in the study: 144 children participated in the SEL intervention program (including 65 pre-school children, group II), and 84 children composed the control group. The pre- and post-test assessments involved hetero- (teacher) and self-reporting (child) scales. The SEL intervention produced significant gains in the children's relationships with their peers, academic behavior, social skills, emotional knowledge, school learning skills, and school, behavioral, and social adjustment, independent of their previous skill level or gender. The SEL intervention was effective at improving the interpersonal strength of children with previously low skill levels, the intrapersonal and total strength of children of parents with a secondary level of education (groups I and II), and preventing the disruption of school functioning in children with parents with a higher education level (group II).

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The importance of social and emotional development for the educational success of pre-school and first cycle [first through fourth grade] children has become increasingly valued by educators and social policy makers in the United States (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, 2005) because social and emotional development determine the extent to which children are able to face the demands of the classroom (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2012). Children with relatively positive social-emotional skill profiles are not only more successful at developing positive attitudes toward school and initially adapting to school but also have better educational outcomes (Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh, & Gest, 2009; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007).

Social and emotional well-being may serve as a basis for children to explore the world and become active in their learning process (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Indeed, the development of a sense of belonging sets the stage for a strong and resilient sense of self which may be sustained throughout school transitions (Woodhead & Rooker, 2008). Making children feel included in a new context involves helping them to become familiar with the new culture and surrounding environment in

order to facilitate their understanding and acceptance (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006).

Several meta-analytical studies on the effects of social and emotional skills programs have been developed in educational settings (CASEL, 2012; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). However, the majority of these programs were implemented at specific locations in the United States (CASEL, 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011); thus, it is unclear whether they are applicable to and/or effective in other cultural settings (Diekstra, Sklad, Gravesteyn, Ben, & Ritter, 2008). Additionally, several of the studies were conducted without a strong empirical framework, a reliable implementation process, or any consideration of the role of student characteristics on the impact of the interventions (Diekstra et al., 2008; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001).

The present study analyzes a social and emotional learning (SEL) program with respect to social and emotional skills and the adjustment of first-grade Portuguese children to school as well as the moderating effect of student characteristics (prior skill level, gender, and parents' educational level) on the program's impact.

1. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs

The majority of SEL programs focus on universal prevention and promotion and involve teaching, practice and the reinforcement of five key competencies: a) self-awareness (identifying and recognizing one's emotions, recognizing one's and others' strengths, self-efficacy, and self-confidence), b) social awareness (empathy, respect for others, and seeing the perspective of others), c) responsible decision-making (evaluation, reflection, and personal and ethical responsibility),

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d) self-management (controlling one's impulses, managing persistent stress, setting goals, and self-motivation), and e) relationship skills (cooperating, seeking and offering help, and communicating effectively) (CASEL, 2003).

Studies on universal SEL programs have demonstrated that children who benefit from intervention manifest improvements in social and emotional skills, their attitudes in relation to themselves, others, and their school, pro-social behavior, and academic development, as well as a decrease in internalization and externalization problems (CASEL, 2012; Durlak et al., 2011).

The most highly effective SEL programs are theoretically coherent (Diekstra & Gravesteyn, 2008) and longitudinal (Greenberg et al., 2001) and follow the SAFE procedures – Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit – i.e., they use coordinated and sequential activities as well as active learning strategies focusing on the development of social-emotional skills with clearly defined specific goals (Durlak et al., 2011) and provide opportunities to practice the skills learned to facilitate their application to other settings (CASEL, 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). Other useful considerations include using a manual that records the program's structure (Diekstra et al., 2008) and clear monitoring to ensure the quality and reliability of the program's implementation (CASEL, 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Greenberg et al., 2001).

2. The role of student characteristics

Few studies have analyzed the effects of student characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, developmental level, socio-economic status, and gender) on the impact of SEL interventions (Diekstra et al., 2008; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2001), and the data from these studies point to contradictory results on the moderating roles of gender and socio-economic status. In certain studies, the effects of the program were moderated by the gender variable, with better results for boys (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group [CPPRG], 2010); however, in other studies, differences in gains as a function of gender were not found (Linares et al., 2005; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008).

With respect to the moderating role of socio-economic status, certain SEL programs were found to have a greater effect in schools with fewer socio-economically disadvantaged children (CPPRG, 2010), while others did not find any significant differences in the gains of “at risk” versus “no risk” children based on socio-demographic variables such as poverty.

The results have been more consistent on the effect of students' prior skill levels; children with initially low skill levels are associated with a more significant improvement of their skills (CPPRG, 2010; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008).

3. The Giant Leap program

“Giant Leap” is a universal program that aims to develop children's social and emotional skills as well as improve the adjustment of children transitioning from pre-school to the first grade. The “Giant Leap” program contains activities involving action and reflection that are sequentially organized in an integrated manner to foster the development of new skills based on previously learned skills. The skills are applied to real situations to expand their usage (see Table 1). The “Giant Leap” activities include the exhibition of instructional videos created specifically for the program, storytelling, group-based educational games, role-playing and artistic expression activities, brainstorming strategies, modeling, constructive feedback, individual positive reinforcement, and group discussion/reflection. The “Giant Leap” program is aimed at preschoolers (“Giant Leap Pre”) and first graders (“Giant Leap 1”). “Giant Leap 1” contains 18 60-min sessions that are implemented weekly, divided into six units. The first unit involves an introduction to the program and an orientation to the transition to

the first grade, and the five remaining units involve SEL components (CASEL, 2003).

Both versions of the program were designed based on the social and emotional learning framework and recommendations of CASEL (CASEL, 2003) and enlisted the perspectives of children, parents, educators, and teachers about the adjustment of students transitioning to formal education, which was previously studied by the research team in a Portuguese setting (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2015a, 2015b). The “Giant Leap” program is based on the ecological and dynamic model of transition of Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), the social and emotional competence framework (Denham, Wyatt, Bassett, Echeverria, & Knox, 2009), and the ABCD model of development (Greenberg et al., 1995) wherein social and emotional competency involves the dynamic integration of emotions, knowledge, and behaviors. Each version of the “Giant Leap” program can be used independently to improve children's skills and adjustment to school.

The results of the present study address the effects of a first-grade “Giant Leap” implementation by comparing a group of students exposed solely to the first-grade version of the intervention with a group of students who were exposed to both versions (pre-school and first grade). The control group was exposed to a program that lacked specific SEL-content instruction. The programs were all implemented by the same psychologist, who has experience working with children in this age group, in the classroom with the teacher present, allowing the children to develop socio-emotional skills through modeling and facilitate the spread of these skills to other settings.

The children in the intervention program were expected to achieve significant gains in their social and emotional skills and adjustment to school compared with the children in the control group (Hypothesis 1). Considering the contradictory results in the literature on the moderating role of individual characteristics on the effects of intervention programs, we put forth the following research questions: a) Will the children with low socio-emotional skill levels and poor adjustment to school benefit more from intervention? b) Will there be greater gains for boys versus girls? c) Will there be any differences in gains associated with the parents' level of education?

4. Research design

The present study is quasi-experimental in nature because the sample is not completely random and all the effects of the school and class variables could not be controlled. The present study involves a 2 (pre-test vs. post-test) × 3 (Intervention II group vs. Intervention I group vs. the control group) design. All the groups were assessed under identical conditions. The Intervention II group included children who were exposed to “Giant Leap” in pre-school in addition to the intervention assessed in this study, while the Intervention I group consisted of children who were solely exposed to “Giant Leap” in the first grade. A fine arts activity program with an identical duration and extent as that of the Intervention I and II groups was applied to the control group.

5. Participants

A total of 228 children (110 girls and 118 boys) who attended the first grade ($M_{age} = 5.95$; $DP = .30$) at four first-cycle schools in the public network of school groupings in the Lisbon region and fourteen teachers, eight for the intervention group (144 children) and six for the control group (84 children), participated in the present study. The children in the intervention group were divided into two groups: those who were exposed to the intervention in both pre-school and first grade (designated Intervention II; $N = 65$) and those who were exposed to the intervention solely in the first grade (Intervention I; $N = 79$). The majority of the children were Caucasian of Portuguese nationality (82.2%), Brazilian nationality (2.2%), and Eastern European origin (1.3%). The study also included black African (9.1%), Asian (0.9%), and Roman (4.3%) children. Two of the first-cycle schools

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