



Classroom quality at pre-kindergarten and kindergarten and children's social skills and behavior problems[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the continuity in the quality of classroom environments as children transition from preschool into elementary school, this study examined the associations between classroom quality in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten and children's social skills and behavior problems in kindergarten and first grade. Participants included 1175 ethnically-diverse children (43% African American) living in low-wealth rural communities of the United States. Results indicated that children who experienced higher levels of emotional and organizational classroom quality in both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten demonstrated better social skills and fewer behavior problems in both kindergarten and first grade comparing to children who did not experience higher classroom quality. The examination of the first grade results indicated that the emotional and organizational quality of pre-kindergarten classrooms was the strongest predictor of children's first grade social skills and behavior problems. The study results are discussed from theoretical, practical, and policy perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, a growing body of research has shown that higher quality early care and education (ECE) is positively related to children's social-emotional development (Barnett, 2011; Lamb & Ahnert, 2006; NICHD ECCRN, 2006). All studies find that associations with ECE diminish after children leave those settings, but some studies find that the positive associations of higher quality ECE remain significant over time (Belsky et al., 2007; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson,

2002; Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Vandell et al., 2010), and other studies find that these positive associations eventually disappear (Deater-Deckard, Pinkerton, & Scarr, 1996; Lipsey, Hofer, Dong, Farran, & Bilbrey, 2013; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Puma et al., 2012). One common explanation for these diminishing associations is that children's new social contexts, such as kindergarten classrooms, become more important as children transition from preschool into elementary school. For example, children who need the most support in terms of their socio-emotional skills and who could benefit the most from higher quality ECE often transition into lower quality elementary schools (Currie & Thomas, 2000; Lee & Loeb, 1995), thus potentially tempering with social skills acquired in higher quality preschool classrooms. Another possibility for diminishing links between preschool classroom quality and children's social-emotional skills is that having only one year of higher quality ECE may not provide enough time for children to develop stable positive social-emotional skills (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006). The primary goal of the present study, thus, was to examine classroom quality during the two consecutive years before and after the transition from preschool settings to elementary school and children's subsequent social and behavioral skills. Using a large sample of children living in low-wealth rural communities, we investigated how classroom quality in

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the year prior to kindergarten (pre-K) and in kindergarten was associated with children's social skills and behavior problems concurrently at the end of kindergarten and one year later in first grade.

1.1. ECE environments and children's social skills and behavior problems

During early childhood, children develop at a rapid rate. Children's experiences and relationships during this period are critical for their future development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Consistently, interventions and investments during the early years appear to have a much higher rate-of-return than interventions at any other stage of life (Heckman, 2006). Higher quality ECE experiences can bear lasting positive relations with child outcomes, next in magnitude to the relations between family characteristics and child outcomes (for reviews, see Barnett, 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). There is robust evidence that higher quality ECE experiences are related to children's early academic skills (Burchinal, Kainz et al., 2014; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Early academic achievement, however, is not the sole predictor of life success (Levin, 2012). The well-known experimental Perry preschool project, for example, found few long-lasting intervention effects on later student academic achievement, but participating children did show better general educational and life outcomes (e.g., higher high school graduation rates and employment status and less criminal history; Heckman et al., 2010). Similar results have been found in a longer-term follow-up Head Start evaluation (Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2000), showing that Head Start children had better general educational outcomes (i.e., high school graduation rates and college attendance) and were less likely to be charged with a crime, compared to their non-Head Start siblings. It has been suggested that improving children's social-emotional skills may serve as an alternative mechanism through which higher quality ECE experiences are associated with better life outcomes (Heckman, 2006).

Several studies have shown that higher quality ECE experiences are linked to fewer child behavior problems and more social skills. For example, recent experimental studies demonstrate that comprehensive social-emotional curricula and professional development that focuses on teachers' responsive interactions can enhance children's social skills, behavior regulation, and emotion understanding (Bierman et al., 2014; Landry et al., 2014). Comparable advantages of high process quality ECE (e.g., teacher-child interactions) for children's social skills and behavior problems are found in observational studies (NICHD ECCRN, 2006; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001), with positive behavioral links sometimes extending to adolescence (Vandell et al., 2010).

An often-used reliable and valid tool to assess classroom quality is the Classroom Assessment Scoring system (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Conceptually, the CLASS consists of three domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The Emotional Support and Classroom Organization domains are regarded as most relevant for children's social-emotional functioning. These domains assess the provision of positive teacher-child interactions and proactive organization and management of children's behavior in the classroom, both of which are necessary factors in the successful development of social and behavioral skills (Downer, Sabol, & Hamre, 2010; Hamre et al., 2013).

Studies that have used the CLASS in the pre-K period or in early elementary school years highlight the links between emotionally supportive and well-managed classrooms and children's social skills and behavior problems. For example, high levels of emotional support in the pre-K year were related to increases in children's social competence and to decreases in children's problem behavior at the end of the pre-K year (Burchinal, Vandergrift,

Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008), and one year later (Curby et al., 2009). Furthermore, high levels of classroom behavioral management and organization were positively associated with the development of children's self-regulation in pre-K (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014) and children's behavioral self-control in kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009). Empirical research shows that early self-regulatory skills are associated with better social skills (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999; Diener & Kim, 2004; Fabes et al., 1999; Spinrad et al., 2007) and fewer behavior problems (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Hill, Degnan, Calkins, & Keane, 2006; Spinrad et al., 2007).

In this study we take a domain-specific approach on socialization (Grusec & Davidov, 2010) by focusing specifically on the emotional and organizational aspects of the classroom environment, as they both have been linked to children's social and behavioral skills. However, it has also been hypothesized that children who experience challenging and engaging instructions may show fewer behavior problems (Downer et al., 2010). Therefore, we also examined possible cross-domain links between the quality of instructional support in a classroom and children's social skills and behavior problems.

1.2. Continuity of ECE quality

Despite the relevance of higher quality ECE for child development, follow-up studies of large-scale pre-K programs suggest that the positive associations with higher quality ECE may become smaller over time (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Lipsey et al., 2013; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001) or even disappear completely (Puma et al., 2012). This is rather discouraging, given that developed countries, including the United States, invest much effort and resources to improve center-based preschool experiences and to enhance children's school success. Yet it is likely that higher quality ECE experiences during the pre-K year do not safeguard children from subsequent low quality elementary school experiences. For example, Head Start children on average attend lower quality elementary schools, and this is especially true for ethnic minority Head Start children (Currie & Thomas, 2000; Lee & Loeb, 1995). When children transition from higher quality pre-K classrooms to lower quality kindergarten classrooms, it is plausible that their initial increases in social skills and reduction in behavior problems are not sustained. As a study of children living in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago indicated, the quality of children's elementary schools served as a key mediator in the positive relations between pre-K program participation and indicators of adult well-being, such as occupational prestige and low depressive symptoms (Reynolds & Ou, 2011).

The necessity of continuous higher quality early care and education to sustain the further development of social and behavioral skills is in line with the *skill begets skill* hypothesis (Cunha et al., 2006; Heckman, 2006). This framework posits that skills developed earlier in life serve as a basis for the development of more advanced skills (i.e., *self-productivity* of skills). Relatedly, these skills developed as a result of early investments, raise the productivity of later investments (i.e., *complementarity* of skills). The synergistic effect of both the self-productivity of skills and the complementarity of skills are positioned to be the multiplier mechanism through which skill begets skill or abilities begets abilities. In terms of the current study, the successful acquisition of social and behavioral skills in the pre-K year thus should facilitate the possibility of subsequent growth of these skills (self-productivity). At the same time, the context of the kindergarten classroom also has to be conducive to children's social-emotional development for children to keep improving their social skills and reducing their behavior problems (complementarity). Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that children who had higher quality pre-K experiences can transition more

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