



Children's preschool classroom experiences and associations with early elementary special education referral

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the association between high quality preschool and improved child outcomes; however, few studies have considered special education referral as a child outcome. This study examined whether four specific aspects of the preschool classroom experience (child engagement, global classroom interaction quality, closeness and conflict in teacher–child relationships) predicted special education referral in early elementary school. Participants were 959 preschoolers in 240 classrooms across 6 states. Of the four aspects of the preschool experience explored, higher levels of conflict in the preschool teacher–child relationship related to greater special education referral in elementary school. Associations between aspects of the preschool classroom experience and special education referral were not moderated by demographic risk. These results imply that relationships play a key role in a child's preschool experience and reasons for potential conflict in teacher–child relationships should be more closely examined.

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1. Introduction

High-quality preschool is increasingly considered an effective preventive measure against later school difficulty and failure. As a result, preschool has increasingly become part of the conversation on education in the United States (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Clarke Brown, & Horowitz, 2015; The White House, 2013). Extensive research demonstrates that high-quality preschool experiences are related to children's improved academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008; Weiland and Yoshikawa, 2013). Specifically, some studies suggest preschool is an effective early intervention for children at-risk for later school difficulties because high-quality preschool experiences relate to reduced special education referral rates (Burger, 2010; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995; Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011; Temple and Reynolds, 2007). While the research base supporting the positive impacts of preschool on children's school trajectories continues to grow, less is known about what specific aspects of the preschool classroom relate to special education referrals in early elementary school (Yoshikawa et al., 2013), which is the goal of the present study. The framework for this study

is based on the previous research demonstrating that among the many aspects of the preschool experience, global classroom interaction quality, child engagement, and teacher–child relationships are some of the important predictors of later positive child development. These aspects are also situated in larger theory suggesting that individuals' interactions with their environment shape their development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Specifically, this study examines to what degree four aspects of the preschool experience (global classroom interaction quality, child engagement, and closeness and conflict in the teacher–child relationship) predict special education referral in kindergarten and first grade when controlling for demographic characteristics. In addition, this study explores whether the association between the preschool experience and special education referral may be moderated by children's cumulative demographic risk.

1.1. Children's future trajectories related to special education and preschool

During the 2012–2013 school year, 6.4 million students, or approximately 13% of children and youth between ages 3–21, received special education services in the United States (Kena et al., 2015). Students receiving special education represent a diverse group of individuals with different academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral strengths and needs; however, all students receiving special education services qualified for these services based on

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being diagnosed with a disability that negatively affected their academic performance. These special education and related services are intended to provide additional support to students in order to access their right to a free public education (Kena et al., 2015).

In the United States, federal education law and regulations prescribe guidelines that states and school divisions must follow regarding special education referrals. This process informally begins with the recognition of a need demonstrated by a student that is not adequately addressed by the regular education classroom and teacher. Educators and families collaborate in order to systematically gather information and address the student's demonstrated need(s). If the student's need is determined to be sufficient for referral, the student is referred for special education services. This referral is typically by the student's teacher and is the first key step in a formal process of determining eligibility for special education services. In this study, we focus specifically on special education referral.

Although special education services are intended to provide additional support, some researchers have demonstrated that certain groups of students are disproportionately represented in referrals for special education (La Paro, Olsen, & Pianta, 2002; Mann, McCartney, & Park, 2007; Sullivan and Bal, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2011). Moreover, eligibility for and placement in special education also results in possible changes in educational expectations and future trajectories. For example, students receiving special education services, especially those from minority backgrounds and with certain disabilities, tend to miss out on the instruction and experiences occurring in the general education classroom (de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Gold & Richards, 2012; McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). Consequently, research shows students are exposed to and learn less of the curriculum (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). Further, individuals in special education graduate at lower rates, limiting future opportunities. In fact, between the school years 2002–2003 and 2006–2007, special education graduation rates ranged from 55.1% to 58.8% (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2011); by comparison, national graduation rates ranged from 73.2% to 75% for the same time period (Stillwell, 2009). In addition, special education services cost almost twice as much as regular education (Chambers, Parrish, Esra, & Shkolnik, 2002). More research is needed on the predictors of special education referral to understand factors that may relate to the prevention of later special education services and to understand characteristics of a child's experience that may relate to the need for special education services. In sum, millions of students in the United States receive special education services; some researchers express concern about access to and disproportionate representation in special education.

1.1.1. Preschool

In addition to special education, there are other services and interventions intended to support children's learning and development. One preventive intervention, preschool, relates to improved academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for children especially children considered at-risk for school failure (Mann et al., 2007). Further, longitudinal studies show early childhood education is associated with reduced referral to special education (Burger, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2011; Temple & Reynolds, 2007). Because of the improved long-term outcomes for children and reduction in special education referral, Temple and Reynolds (2007) concluded financial investment in high-quality preschool programs reduced long-term costs. Therefore, high-quality preschool is a cost effective early intervention.

While research demonstrates the positive impacts of preschool, however, not all preschool experiences are equal (Cabell, DeCoster, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, & Pianta, 2013). Quality of the program appears critically important, with children attending higher quality programs experiencing greater and longer lasting impacts on their immediate and future trajectories (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Burchinal et al., 2008, 2010; Magnuson et al., 2007; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Although several studies have indicated a positive association between preschool classroom quality and children's outcomes, there have been fewer studies examining the relationship between specific aspects of the preschool classroom experience and special education referral.

1.2. Preschool classroom experience

Preschool quality has been defined in terms of process and structural aspects of the classroom that contribute to children's development (Magnuson et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). While structural quality focuses on the characteristics of the program and staff, such as teacher credentials, classroom size, and classroom ratio, process quality focuses on the children's immediate classroom experiences such as the instructional and social interactions between children and teachers (Early et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2008; Sabol and Pianta, 2012; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Given process quality aspects are more associated with children's skills than structural aspects (Early et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008), this study will examine four aspects of process quality in the preschool classroom experience: global classroom interaction quality, child engagement, and closeness and conflict in teacher–child relationships. Each will be reviewed in more detail below.

1.2.1. Global classroom interaction quality

Recent research defines global classroom interaction quality in terms of the teaching through interactions framework (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2005). This framework consists of three main domains that describe teacher–child interactions: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). Interactions in high-quality classrooms are characterized by development of children's social and emotional functioning, directing behavior and attention towards academic goals, and organizing and scaffolding learning for children (Hamre et al., 2013; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004).

In a study examining the association between global classroom interaction quality and children's academic, language, and social skills at the end of preschool, Mashburn et al. (2008) found that global classroom interaction quality as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008) predicted children's skills at the end of preschool. Specifically, higher classroom interaction quality was positively related to children's academic and language skills, teachers' ratings of higher social competence, and fewer behavior problems. Additional studies have found relationships between overall classroom quality and children's language outcomes at the end of preschool (Burchinal et al., 2010; Howes et al., 2008). Again, children in classrooms with higher quality global interactions had better academic, social, and behavioral skills (Burchinal et al., 2010).

Evidence suggests that the positive associations between classroom interaction quality and children's outcomes extend beyond children's earliest learning in preschool to children's future trajectories into elementary school (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). For example, global preschool classroom interaction quality significantly predicted children's outcomes at the end of kindergarten (Burchinal et al., 2008). Preschool teacher–child interactions characterized by positive and frequent exchanges, encouragement of language

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