



## The effects of exposure to an enhanced preschool program on the social-emotional functioning of at-risk children



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### ABSTRACT

Social and emotional skills facilitate school readiness, yet evaluations of preschool programs typically focus on the cognitive benefits of early education and rarely examine the impact of preschool on “non-cognitive” outcomes. This study used propensity score matching to create two groups of preschool participants to compare how preschool duration was associated with children’s emotion knowledge, social competence, and behavioral adjustment at kindergarten. Subjects were drawn from an evaluation study of a comprehensive public preschool program that included an evidence-based social-emotional curriculum. Compared to children who participated in one year of the preschool program, children who attended for two years were rated by teachers as exhibiting greater levels of social competence over time from the first year of preschool to kindergarten. At kindergarten, children who attended the program for two years demonstrated higher levels of emotion knowledge. Implications of the results for preschool interventions are discussed.

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Social and emotional skills enable children to develop the positive relationships with teachers and peers that foster school success (Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). They also help children manage the cognitive and behavioral demands of the kindergarten classroom. For this reason, social and emotional skills and the adaptive behaviors they promote are included as indicators of school readiness (National School Readiness Indicator Initiative, 2005) and are cited by kindergarten teachers as being equally critical for successful school entry as traditional academic skills such as knowing the letters of the alphabet (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

Research suggests that exposure to high-quality preschool has positive effects on cognitive and social development, attention, reading and math skills, and educational success that last into adolescence and adulthood (Gormley, Phillips, Newmark, Welti, & Adelstein, 2011; Huang, Invernizzi, & Drake, 2012; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Manning, Homel, & Smith, 2010; Schweinhart et al., 2005). This makes early education a cost-effective approach to improving children’s health and well-being

(Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, & Pennucci, 2004; Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2006). Children raised in poverty are at-risk and more likely to exhibit a lag in cognitive and behavioral aspects of school readiness (Anthony, Anthony, Morrel, & Acosta, 2005). Therefore, providing comprehensive preschool programming to low-income children that promotes social and emotional skills as well as the cognitive building blocks of academic learning is an important prevention strategy. This was the rationale behind the formation of the national Head Start program and the reason why many states are expanding the money that is allocated to public preschool (Barnett, 2010).

The current study is an evaluation of an urban public preschool program serving a low-income population. The program followed Head Start guidelines for structure and content, but adopted several evidence-based curricular enhancements, including the Preschool Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Curriculum (Preschool PATHS; Domitrovich, Greenberg, Kusché, & Cortez, 2005), to improve children’s school readiness. The focus of this paper is on the social-emotional and behavioral outcomes achieved by the program (findings for academic outcomes can be found in Domitrovich et al., 2013). A unique feature of the current study is the fact that children’s competencies were assessed with a direct assessment as well as through teacher-ratings. The design of the

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program, which included enrolling both three- and four-year-old children, provided the opportunity to examine how duration of an enhanced program impacted these indicators of school readiness.

### The importance of social-emotional competence for school readiness

Over the past several years, researchers discussing the non-academic skills that are important for school readiness and long-term behavioral health have combined two previously independent terms, emotional competence and social competence, into the term social-emotional competence to reflect the connections between these two domains of functioning (Denham, 2006; Denham, Zinsler, & Brown, 2012; Thompson & Goodman, 2011). Emotional competence is a broad construct that includes a number of discrete skills including emotion knowledge, emotion regulation, and emotion expression, measured directly or through adult ratings and observations (Denham, 2006). Children with high levels of emotion knowledge understand their own emotional experiences, empathize with others, and are able to accurately identify emotions in others (Izard, Stark, Trentacosta, & Schultz, 2008). They also understand the kinds of situations that are associated with different feelings and the consequences of emotional experiences (Denham et al., 2012), which facilitate positive social interactions with others and fewer behavior problems (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Garner & Waajid, 2012; Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). Low levels of emotional knowledge in early childhood are longitudinally associated with aggression and other problem behavior in early elementary school (Denham, Blair, Schmidt, & DeMulder, 2002; Trentacosta & Fine, 2010). In all, evidence suggests that children with greater emotional knowledge are better adjusted socially and behaviorally in preschool and into later childhood (Denham et al., 2003; Ensor, Spencer, & Hughes, 2010; McClelland et al., 2007; Miller, Gouley, Seifer, Dickstein, & Shields, 2004).

Several theoretical models conceptualize emotional competence as the foundation of social competence (Halberstadt et al., 2001; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Social competence is defined as *effectiveness in interaction* with others and is typically assessed with measures of interpersonal skill (e.g., cooperation), prosocial behavior, and the quality of children's relationships with adults and peers (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006). Students with problem behavior are often rated as low in social competence because they often lack the interpersonal skills needed to get along with others (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005).

The influence of social-emotional competence is especially evident at school entry, one of the most important transitions of the early childhood period (Thompson & Raikes, 2007). Children's success at navigating this important developmental milestone is dependent on their skills in both of these domains as they affect how well they adjust to the demands of the classroom setting (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2008; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). Studies have shown that young children who demonstrate higher levels of social-emotional competence, both in terms of emotional knowledge and interpersonal skills, and lower levels of problem behavior are better able to engage in learning during preschool (McClelland et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2004). They also have greater academic success in early elementary school (Leerkes, Paradise, O'Brien, Calkins, & Lange, 2008; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Torres, Domitrovich, & Bierman, 2013).

Researchers have developed and tested cognitive and social-emotional curricular enhancements that integrate with existing models of preschool practice (Bierman et al., 2008); in an effort to improve quality and strengthen the impact of early intervention (including Head Start) on children's readiness for school. The positive impacts of these developmentally focused, comprehensive

curricula build the evidence-base regarding the importance of social and emotional competencies for early school success and these programs are now being disseminated and becoming more common in community settings (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

### Preschool PATHS

The Preschool PATHS (Domitrovich et al., 2005) curriculum includes 44 lessons that foster children's ability to recognize and communicate about emotions in themselves and others, self-regulation, and the social-cognitive and interpersonal skills that are necessary for prosocial behavior and positive peer relations. In addition to explicit instruction in these areas, teachers use complementary teaching strategies to create a positive classroom environment that supports the development of these skills and relationships. The curriculum included formal and informal extension activities that are designed to help generalize the core concepts presented in the lessons and create additional opportunities for social and emotional learning throughout the day. The content and instructional strategies included in the curriculum are based on the ABCD (Affective-Behavioral-Cognitive-Dynamic) model of development which emphasizes the integration of emotion language, behavior, and cognitive understanding to promote social and emotional competence (Greenberg & Kusché, 1993; Kusché, Riggs, & Greenberg, 1999). Implicit in the model is the idea that young children experience and react on an emotional level long before they can verbalize their experiences and that behavioral regulation is a function of emotional awareness, affective-cognitive control, and social-cognitive understanding. As a result, affective knowledge needs to be integrated with cognitive and linguistic abilities which are slower to develop.

The Preschool PATHS curriculum has demonstrated positive effects on children's social-emotional outcomes in three randomized trials involving implementation by teachers in Head Start classrooms. In the first study, Head Start children who received Preschool PATHS showed higher levels of emotional understanding as measured with the Kusché Emotional Inventory (KEI; Kusché, 1984) and other measures. PATHS participants were also rated more socially competent and less socially withdrawn by teachers and parents than children in the control group (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). More recently, the efficacy of Preschool PATHS was tested in the context of a large-scale, randomized trial commissioned by the Head Start Bureau and conducted by an independent research team with effects that were consistent with previous research (Morris et al., 2014). Students in the PATHS classrooms had greater emotion knowledge, problem solving skills, and higher levels of prosocial behavior compared to control students after one year of exposure (effect size .17–.29). A prior study conducted with the current sample assessed the relationship between the duration of preschool and academic outcomes and found that children who entered at age 3 had significantly better receptive vocabulary, letter naming, letter-word skills, and numeracy skills at kindergarten (effect size .33–.53) compared to children who entered at age 4 (Domitrovich et al., 2013).

Preschool PATHS was integrated with evidence-based language and literacy components in a previous study to create a comprehensive curriculum similar to the one used in the preschool classrooms of this study. This program, referred to as Head Start REDI, was implemented and tested in a randomized trial against teachers following "usual practice." Results revealed significant program effects favoring children in the enriched intervention classrooms on measures of vocabulary, emergent literacy, emotional understanding, social problem-solving, positive social behavior, and learning engagement at the end of preschool (Bierman et al., 2008) that were sustained into kindergarten (Bierman et al., 2013). Additional analyses also demonstrated that preschool gains in social-emotional

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