



The validity of interactive peer play competencies for Latino preschool children from low-income households

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ABSTRACT

In accord with a strength-based, eco-cultural model, the present study examined the validity of the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale-Teacher report (PIPPS-T; Fantuzzo, Coolahan, Mendez, McDermott, & Sutton-Smith, 1998) for use with Latino preschool children from low-income backgrounds. Capitalizing upon a large, statewide sample of Latino children ($N = 824$, M age = 52.54 months ($SD = 8.73$)), exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses identified three reliable and distinct dimensions of peer social competence: Play Interaction, Play Disruption, and Play Disconnection. Findings from multilevel models controlling for program, family, and child demographic variables, provided criterion-related validity for the three dimensions with some differential associations to concurrent assessments of children's learning-related and pre-academic skills at the end the Head Start year. Study findings extend prior research, supporting the utility of the PIPPS to assess the construct of peer social competence for Latino children from low-income backgrounds. Implications for early childhood research, practice, and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Identifying opportunities to promote the development of children from low-income, ethnic minority households is critical to promote their early school success, as they face disproportionate risks during the formative early childhood period (Garbarino, 1995). In particular, Latino children, the fastest growing ethnic minority group of young children in the U.S., comprise 23% of the nation's population younger than 18 years of age (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011), and face increased risks to their academic readiness for kindergarten. They are statistically more likely to come from non-English-speaking immigrant families living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), more likely to perform poorly in U.S. schools in reading and other academic areas upon kindergarten entry (Rathbun, West, & Germino Hausken, 2004), and more likely to be retained and drop out of school in the long-term (Gersten & Woodward, 1994).

Early childhood programs serving low-income children have the opportunity to provide high-quality educational services during a time in development, when children's learning is most malleable and amenable to intervention (Heckman & Masterov, 2007).

Programs such as Head Start serve increasing numbers of children from Latino households, with 38% of Head Start preschool programs' annual enrollment comprising Latino children (Child Trends Databank, 2014). Services are aligned with a comprehensive, whole child and a resilience-oriented framework, and focus on identifying and building upon children's strengths as they naturally occur within early learning contexts (Lamb-Parker, LeBuffe, Powell, & Halpern, 2008; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). Social competence observed through children's engagement in interactive play with peers is identified as a naturally occurring, developmentally appropriate, context for learning (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000). A line of research has validated a multidimensional teacher and parent rating scale of peer social competence, specifically for preschool children from low-income, ethnic minority households. Fantuzzo et al. (1998) developed and validated the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS) as a culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate assessment of children's strengths and needs, within the context of peer play. Overall, this research conducted with predominantly African American children attending Head Start documents consistent associations between positive engagement in peer play within the preschool classroom and the development of both social and pre-academic skills critical to early school success (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012a,b).

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However, to date, few studies have examined the validity of the PIPPS specifically for use with children from low-income, Latino households. More research is needed to inform classroom-based intervention practices as well as our understanding of the developmental strengths of Latino children. Therefore the purpose of our study was to extend the validity of the teacher version of the PIPPS for use with Latino children, capitalizing on a statewide sample of Latino children enrolled in Head Start. We examined (a) whether reliable and valid dimensions of peer play competence were evident in a large, state-wide sample; and (b) whether resultant dimensions of peer play competence differentially related to two key domains of school readiness for preschool children: teacher-report of approaches to learning (e.g., how children initiate, engage, and persist during learning tasks); and direct assessments of pre-academic skills in language, literacy and mathematics assessed in both Spanish and English.

1.1. Strength-based eco-cultural framework for Latino children

Both a strength-based resiliency and eco-cultural theoretical model provide a framework for studying peer social competence within the preschool setting for children from low-income, Latino backgrounds. A resilience framework promotes identifying competencies within naturalistic settings, such as the preschool classroom and home context to support early development (Lamb-Parker et al., 2008). Particularly for ethnic minority children, Cabrera and The SRCD Ethnic and Racial Issues Committee (2013) call for our field to move more deliberately from the deficit orientation of research examining risk processes toward an emphasis on positive developmental processes. During the early childhood period, peer interactions often occur naturally and spontaneously within the context of play, and are an important positive developmental context for children's social and academic development. For example, peer play interactions provide opportunities for children to practice and extend vocabulary skills, mathematic and scientific concepts, and in general construct a deeper understanding of the world around them (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). Through cooperative peer and symbolic play, other early cognitive skills such as creativity, prosocial skills such as sharing, helping, and learning empathy towards others, and self-regulatory skills can be fostered (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009; Singer et al., 2006).

From an eco-cultural perspective, an important consideration in the development of Latino children's peer social competence is the unique context of their family and community (Bridges et al., 2012; Galindo and Fuller, 2010). Eco-cultural theories recognize that children's proximal experiences are influenced by more distal variables (e.g., parents' immigrant background, years in the U.S.) and that these ecological factors play a dynamic role in children's social and academic development (Reese, Garner, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000). Understanding children's unique eco-cultural context is important for ethnic minority children as they transition from the home environment into the preschool setting (Ogbu, 1999; Rogoff, 2003). For example, research suggests that Latino children are socialized by their families to demonstrate a cultural value of "respeto." This cultural value emphasizes obedience and deference to adults, and encompasses a set of attitudes and behaviors shown by the child to illustrate this respect for adults, particularly in the family (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010). Growing up within a family that emphasizes this cultural value provides a strong foundation for positive social behavior for children in school (Calzada et al., 2010).

In accord with this eco-cultural framework, scholars have called for research utilizing a *within group* (versus a comparative) approach in order to reveal the unique developmental strengths of Latino preschool children (Castro, Mendez, Garcia, & Westerberg, 2012; Fuller & Garcia Coll, 2010). Halle et al. (2014) acknowledge

heterogeneity in the social-emotional competencies of Latino children from low-income families, and such variability was related directly to the language(s) spoken at home, the immigrant status of the child and family members, the expectations for social and language development from the family, and the demands and resources available at the child's preschool. Although research suggests that social competence is a strength of Latino children (e.g., they are socialized within their family and community to show respect for adults and comportment in public settings; Bridges et al., 2012; Calzada et al., 2010; Calzada, Tamis-LeMonda, & Yoshikawa, 2012), to date, few studies have examined the peer social competence of Latino children and how this contributes to learning. More research is needed to examine Latino children's social competence using validated assessments.

1.2. Relationships between peer social competence, approaches to learning, and pre-academic skills

Early childhood research consistently documents positive associations between social, emotional, and regulatory skills, approaches to learning, and pre-academic skills for national samples of low-income and middle-class children (Raver, 2002). In addition, a body of research documents these associations for predominantly African American preschool children from low-income backgrounds (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012a,b). With respect to children from Latino, low-income backgrounds, limited studies of children's social competence have been conducted. These studies employ large local samples of low-income preschool children (DeFeyter & Winsler, 2009) or nationally representative kindergarten samples such as the ECLS-K (Crosnoe, 2007; Galindo and Fuller, 2010; Halle et al., 2014). Findings from this set of comparative studies suggest that Latino children demonstrate strengths in social skills and approaches to learning, compared to other ethnic minority children. One recent within-group study used the PIPPS to identify profile groups of social and academic competence for a sample of 207 Latino, bilingual low-income preschool children from the Northeast; two of the groups of children displayed profiles of socially competent behavior. Children within this "resilient" group concurrently displayed strengths in self-regulation, autonomous behavior, non-verbal cognitive skills, and oral language skills (Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, & Maniatis, 2011). Findings replicated prior work conducted with African American samples suggesting that social competence is associated with other important readiness competencies (Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002).

1.3. Social competence and approaches to learning

Approaches toward learning, a key domain of school readiness, is defined as initiative, curiosity, enthusiasm, persistence, flexibility, and problem-solving skills in the face of challenging learning tasks (Hyson, 2008). Approaches to learning skills are domain-general skills, which serve as a foundation for learning more domain-specific skills (such as literacy, language skills). Typically, three dimensions are assessed: initiative/motivation to learn, attention/persistence during challenging tasks, positive attitude toward learning (McDermott, Green, Francis, & Stott, 2000). Studies conducted with predominantly African American Head Start samples document positive associations between children's peer play skills observed in the classroom and both attention/persistence and a positive attitude toward learning (Coolahan et al., 2000). In contrast, difficulties engaging in positive peer play interactions, such as withdrawn or disconnected behavior, are associated with lower competence motivation (Coolahan et al., 2000). Disruptive behavior in the peer context within the Head Start classroom also has been negatively associated with lower attitude toward learn-

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