



Investigating the relationship between social behaviors and phonological awareness in preschool children

Lisa-Christine Girard ^{*}, Luigi Girolametto

University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined the longitudinal effects of social behaviors in predicting phonological awareness outcomes in 4-year-old children.

Method: One hundred two children (52 boys, 50 girls) were recruited from 11 schools serving low-income neighborhoods in a large metropolitan city and were assessed at the beginning and end of the preschool year. All children received assessments of their phonological awareness skills, expressive vocabulary, non-verbal IQ, and teachers completed behavioral ratings at pretest. At the end of the academic year, children participated in tests of phonological awareness using standardized assessments.

Results: The results of a multiple regression analysis indicated that being excluded by peers contributed up to 3% of the variance in negatively predicting phonological awareness outcomes after controlling for initial phonological awareness skills, expressive vocabulary, and cognition which is a small effect size.

Conclusion: Early peer exclusion can impact negatively on the acquisition of phonological awareness skills in 4-year-old children in preschool. The results of this study suggest that a child's overall behavioral competence and how they are treated by the peer group may play an important role in their ease of academic skill attainment. Given the link between peer exclusion and difficulties with phonological awareness outcomes, additional professional development programs that provide teachers with strategies to create inclusive classrooms may be warranted in preventing against the emergence of maladaptive behaviors at first entry into formal schooling.

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to examine two important areas of child development and their interrelationships. Specifically, this study considers the relationship between children's social behavioral competence and emergent literacy skills in typically developing 4-year old preschoolers from low-income neighborhoods. There have been few studies that have examined this relationship in children as young as 4 years of age. Further, no studies have focused exclusively on phonological awareness skills as the specific emergent literacy outcome measure. Therefore, this study has the potential to contribute to explanations of how social behaviors may impact upon children's phonological awareness outcomes.

The development of emergent literacy skills

An important focus in preschool is the development of emergent literacy skills, which encompass letter knowledge, phonological awareness, print concepts, and oral language (Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti, & Lonigan, 2008; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Lonigan, Burgess, &

Anthony, 2000). A conceptual model of emergent literacy developed by Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) posits that the transition from emergent literacy to conventional literacy in childhood is contingent upon two processes, namely "inside-out" and "outside-in" skills. Inside-out skills consist of skills that children acquire which are not context dependent, such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge or phoneme-grapheme correspondence. These skills require children to have knowledge of the "rules" of translation from print to auditory and oral production (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, children can have good understanding of alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness skills allowing them to read text but lack the ability to extract meaning from what they have read. The ability to extract meaning from text requires what Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) define as outside-in skills. Outside-in skills are context dependent and require children to use knowledge outside the printed letters in text to understand the meaning. Such knowledge would include children's oral language (e.g., vocabulary), syntactic and semantic knowledge, narrative comprehension, and conceptual knowledge. Both inside-out and outside-in skills are necessary for children's future success with reading.

However, phonological awareness is the focus in the current study as it is considered to be a foundational skill necessary for future success with decoding (Ehri et al., 2001; Lonigan et al., 1999; Savage et al., 2005). In addition, phonological awareness at age 5 has been found

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lisa.girard@utoronto.ca (L.-C. Girard).

to predict later math and science outcomes at age 11 when decoding, letter–sound knowledge, and early reading skills are controlled (Savage, Carless, & Ferraro, 2007). Thus, variation in children's phonological awareness skills may provide explanatory insights into children's academic achievement in a number of subject domains that are dependent on reading skills.

Social behavioral competence and emergent literacy outcomes

Another important objective for preschool children is the development of social behavioral skills (Ministry of Education, 2006). Social behaviors are defined as the physical and verbal acts that children exhibit while interacting with teachers and peers. It has been suggested that children's early social behavior can impact on learning, specifically on emergent literacy outcomes at the end of kindergarten and into grade school (e.g., Doctoroff, Greer, & Arnold, 2006). A current theoretical perspective on the relationship between social behavior and emergent literacy posits that negative social behaviors can lead directly to impaired literacy achievement through a reduction in children's attention and motivation (Miles & Stipek, 2006; Arnold, 1997). Further, when a teacher needs to interrupt teaching moments to address behavioral concerns, there is a shift in focus and the learning moment may be disrupted.

Moreover, children who are continually engaging in negative social behaviors are often less accepted by their peers. Poor peer acceptance has also been found to impact on engagement in classroom activities and learning (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Reiser, 2008). For example, Buhs and Ladd (2001) measured the relationship between peer rejection and academic motivation in a sample of 399 kindergartens across the year. The results suggested that kindergarten children who were rejected and mistreated by the peer group were more likely to show decreases in classroom participation, performed worse on measures of academic achievement, and had higher levels of desire to avoid school entirely. Thus, engagement in negative social behaviors and being rejected by the peer group may impact adversely on academic engagement and learning outcomes.

Additionally, high engagement in positive social behaviors (i.e., prosocial) may result in better acquisition and consolidation of phonological awareness skills over time. For example, a significant positive relationship has been found to exist between prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping a peer) and reading achievement in kindergarten to grade 3 (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Miles & Stipek, 2006). This positive impact of prosocial behavior on children's literacy skills may be due to the finding that children who are socially skilled receive more positive feedback and reinforcement from teachers during learning activities (Miles & Stipek, 2006). This may in turn increase their motivation to excel in academic tasks. However, there is a paucity of studies that have examined the relationship between prosocial behaviors and emergent literacy outcomes in very early childhood (Miles & Stipek, 2006). Therefore the aim of the current study is to examine the extent to which both negative and positive social behaviors impact the acquisition of phonological awareness skills in preschool children across the academic year.

Emergent literacy and children's social behavioral competencies

Conversely, previous studies have found longitudinal relationships between low literacy achievement in kindergarten and grade 1 to predict higher rates of engagement in negative social behaviors up to six years later (Bennett, Brown, Boyle, Racine, & Offord, 2003; Hinshaw, 1992; Jorm, Share, Matthews, & Maclean, 1986; McGee, Williams, Share, Anderson, & Silva, 1986; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Romano, Babchishin, Pagani, & Kohen, 2010). While the majority of these studies did not find a significant negative relationship between low literacy and negative social behaviors to exist as early as kindergarten, one study did reveal a significant negative relationship (Bennett et al., 2003).

Theoretically, children who struggle with emergent literacy skills may become frustrated in the classroom context and resort to negative social behaviors such as aggression. Further, these children may withdraw from classroom activities, may internalize feelings of inadequacy, or may become disengaged, inattentive and easily distractible during learning moments (Hagan-Burke et al., 2011; Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005). A plausible explanation for the limited findings between poor literacy and negative behaviors in kindergarten children likely relates to the fact that most children in kindergarten are not yet reading. Thus, there would be minimal variability in children's reading ability resulting in the need for extremely large sample sizes to detect any significant relationship. Therefore, the current study focuses on the relationship between social behaviors at the beginning of the year and the impact upon phonological awareness outcomes at the end of the year.

Methodological differences in the current literature

Although previous studies posit a relationship between social behavior and literacy attainment in kindergarten through grade 5 (e.g., Lonigan et al., 1999; Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2011; Doctoroff et al., 2006; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Trzesniewski, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Maughan, 2006), the strength of the relationship varies across studies. This variation may be the result of methodological differences. These methodological differences include a) the limited scope of social behaviors assessed, b) the measures used to assess literacy outcomes (i.e., composite scores of oral language measures such as vocabulary and literacy skills), and c) lack of control of extraneous variables (i.e., cognition and children's baseline skills).

First, many studies have focused specifically upon the relationship between aggression and emergent literacy acquisition (Jorm et al., 1986; McGee et al., 1986; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). However, in non-clinical samples aggressive behaviors often peak around the age of three and start to decline by the age of four to five (Alink et al., 2006; Tremblay, Gervais, & Pettitclerc, 2008) when children begin their formal entry into school. Thus, it is important to increase the scope of social behaviors examined as aggressive behaviors may not be as prevalent in samples of 4–5-year-old children such as in the current study. Further, increasing target social behaviors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social behaviors that contribute to emergent literacy outcomes in young children.

The current study extends past research by examining multiple social behavioral outcomes (i.e., externalizing, internalizing, and social competence). Externalizing behaviors include *Aggressive with Peers* (e.g., hitting, kicking) and *Hyperactive/Distractible* (e.g., squirmy and fidgety, can't sit still). Internalizing behaviors include *Asocial with Peers* (e.g., solitary child) and *Anxious/Fearful* (e.g., cries easily). Social competence is measured in the current study as being *Prosocial with Peers* (e.g., helping a peer). Finally, *Excluded by Peers* (e.g., not chosen as playmate) was also examined. While exclusion by peers is not an internal action of the child such as being asocial with peers, it does reflect social-behavioral competencies as excluded children typically engage in prior negative social behaviors that lead to the subsequent rejection from the peer group.

These social behaviors were selected because the impact of internalizing and externalizing social behaviors in addition to social competence in relation to emergent literacy outcomes is under studied in 4-year-olds. Further, the occurrence of these social behaviors in preschool children is likely to be observed (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Doctoroff et al., 2006; Tremblay et al., 2008). Finally, previous studies have suggested that externalizing social behaviors (e.g., Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994) and internalizing social behaviors (e.g., Kohen, Oliver, & Pierre, 2009) may be more prevalent in children from lower SES families such as in the current study.

A second challenge to interpreting the existing literature is how emergent literacy outcomes are defined. Composite scores of emergent literacy and oral language (e.g., expressive and receptive vocabulary) have been commonly employed as the emergent literacy outcome in

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