The role of context in preschool learning: A multilevel examination of the contribution of context-specific problem behaviors and classroom process quality to low-income children's approaches to learning[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that promoting adaptive approaches to learning early in childhood may help close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Recent research has identified specific child-level and classroom-level variables that are significantly associated with preschoolers' approaches to learning. However, further research is needed to understand the interactive effects of these variables and determine whether classroom-level variables buffer the detrimental effects of child-level risk variables. Using a largely urban and minority sample ($N = 275$) of preschool children, the present study examined the additive and interactive effects of children's context-specific problem behaviors and classroom process quality dimensions on children's approaches to learning. Teachers rated children's problem behavior and approaches to learning and independent assessors conducted classroom observations to assess process quality. Problem behaviors in structured learning situations and in peer and teacher interactions were found to negatively predict variance in approaches to learning. Classroom process quality domains did not independently predict variance in approaches to learning. Nonetheless, classroom process quality played an important role in these associations; high emotional support buffered the detrimental effects of problem

behavior, whereas high instructional support exacerbated them. The findings of this study have important implications for classroom practices aimed at helping children who exhibit problem behaviors.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research indicates that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are at heightened risk for educational difficulties (e.g., Bornstein & Bradley, 2003; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). When compared to children from middle- or high-income households, children living in poverty are twice as likely to repeat grades, be suspended from school, and drop out of high school (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997). Quality early childhood educational experiences, such as those provided by Head Start, have been identified as important protective influences that can mitigate the negative effects of poverty on early learning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). These comprehensive early childhood programs aim to foster children's school readiness in multiple domains including language and literacy, mathematics, science, and approaches to learning (U.S. Department of Health, Human Services, 2002).

The approaches to learning domain, in particular, has received substantial attention over the past years (e.g., Fantuzzo, Perry, & McDermott, 2004; Hyson, 2008; McDermott, Leigh, & Perry, 2002). The term *approaches to learning*, also referred to as *learning behaviors*, is considered an umbrella term encompassing different ways in which children approach or react to learning situations (Hyson, 2008; Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). Although researchers agree that approaches to learning are essential skills children need to engage in classroom learning, it is somewhat unclear which specific behaviors or skills constitute the larger construct (Hyson, 2008). Nonetheless, some of the most commonly researched components of approaches to learning include curiosity, competence motivation, initiative, persistence, problem solving, and cooperation with peers (Barnett, Bauer, Ehrhardt, Lentz, & Stollar, 1996). Early childhood researchers and educators have recently become interested in approaches to learning because (a) they are theoretically considered malleable and believed to be amenable to intervention, and (b) they are viewed as domain general because they facilitate children's learning across a variety of other school readiness domains. In fact, researchers have found that approaches to learning explain a substantial proportion of the variability in academic achievement, after controlling for more stable traits like intelligence (Schaefer & McDermott, 1999).

In sum, research suggests that approaches to learning are teachable skills that connect children to fundamental classroom learning experiences critical to early school success (Kagan et al., 1995). Given their potential contribution across a variety of domains, approaches to learning appear to be an important area for targeting early intervention efforts. Some indeed believe that approaches to learning are an important skill set that can be fostered in programs serving low-income children, such as Head Start, to reduce the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Goodson, 2009). However, little is currently known about how children develop approaches to learning or the factors that may influence their development. Taking a closer look at child-level and classroom-level processes that contribute to the development of adaptive approaches to learning is essential to inform early educational interventions targeting low-income children.

1.1. Ecological systems framework

The ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) provides a framework for understanding multiple levels of influences on children's approaches to learning by describing how children's development is not only shaped by their individual characteristics but also by the proximal environments in which they develop (e.g., preschool classrooms). Under this model, children's development stems largely from interactions between their individual characteristics and those of the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The current study took an ecological approach to understanding approaches to learning during early childhood by examining both the additive and interactive influences of