



Social-emotional learning profiles of preschoolers' early school success: A person-centered approach[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Examined how aspects of social-emotional learning (SEL)—specifically, emotion knowledge, emotional and social behaviors, social problem-solving, and self-regulation—clustered to typify groups of children who differ in terms of their motivation to learn, participation in the classroom, and other indices of early school adjustment and academic success. 275 four-year-old children from private day schools and Head Start were directly assessed and observed in these areas, and preschool and kindergarten teachers provided information on social and academic aspects of their school success. Three groups of children were identified: SEL Risk, SEL Competent-Social/Expressive, and SEL Competent-Restrained. Group members differed on demographic dimensions of gender and center type, and groups differed in meaningful ways on school success indices, pointing to needed prevention/intervention programming. In particular, the SEL Risk group could benefit from emotion-focused programming, and the long-term developmental trajectory of the SEL Competent-Restrained group requires study.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have recently begun to focus on not only cognitive, but also social and emotional, aspects of preschoolers' school readiness, as crucial for concurrent and later well-being and mental health, as well as learning and early school success (Denham, 2006; Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000; Peth-Pierce, 2000). As Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2007) have noted, "schools are social places, and learning is a social process" (p. 191). Even young students learn alongside and in collaboration with teachers and peers, and must be able to utilize their emotions to facilitate learning. During schooling, a child's abilities to understand emotions of self and other, regulate emotion, attention, and behavior, make good decisions regarding social problems, express healthy emotions, and engage in a range of prosocial behaviors—their social-emotional learning (SEL) skills—all work together to grease the cogs of a successful school

experience (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). But SEL success may not be easy for children just entering pre-academic and academic settings, because preschool and kindergarten contexts are taxing for them to navigate—they are often required to sit still, attend, follow directions, and approach and enter group play, all of which may challenge their nascent abilities. Unfortunately, many children have deficits in these skills by school entry (Buscemi, Bennett, Thomas, & Deluca, 1996; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

Thus, SEL is vital to individual children's early school success; but the combination of all SEL components into *types* of children (which are, after all, the way parents and teachers see children—as entities, not as discrete skills, however important these specific skills may be) has not been studied. There are important advantages of investigating children's individual differences in SEL from a person-centered approach. Variable-centered approaches (e.g., regression analyses) typically emphasize universal explanations for developmental outcomes by enumerating outcomes for the "average" child. In contrast, person-centered approaches allow identification of subgroups, whose constellations vary in meaningful ways (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Richters, 1997). Such results provide a more holistic—and at the same time more individualized—approach to child development.

Concentration on variable-centered models thus creates a gap in our understanding of young children and our abilities to promote their successful development. To remedy this problem, we examined how aspects of SEL *clustered into profiles of children*, to promote early school success in social and academic domains. We sought to identify subgroups of children characterized by specific SEL profiles, and were

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particularly interested in understanding how these subgroups varied in their later social and academic adjustment to preschool and kindergarten classroom settings.

1.1. Theoretical approach

It is important to ground our work theoretically and definitionally. An adaptation of Rose-Krasnor's (1997) theorizing helps in constructing a detailed working definition of SEL (see Fig. 1). Hence, we put forward the definition of the construct at the model's topmost level, as effectiveness in social interaction, the result of organized behaviors that assure success at central developmental tasks. The SEL tasks specific to early childhood center on maintaining positive engagement in the physical, social, and cognitive/attentional environment, as well as managing emotional arousal (Howes, 1987; Parker & Gottman, 1989). These developmental tasks are important benchmarks against which to evaluate a child's SEL success; all components of SEL are operative in their service. That is, the more microanalytic elements of SEL, at the model's lowest level—all of which are primarily individual—are vital contributors to a child's ultimate successful, effective interaction with other people and associated age-appropriate tasks. We focus on four of the five core SEL competencies at this level, to be examined in this investigation: self-regulation, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship/social skills (Payton et al., 2000; Zins et al., 2007).

1.2. Relations of SEL to school success

Each core SEL competency has its own theoretical traditions and voluminous empirical literatures. We briefly define each and review how it is related to social and academic success in school. We center our thinking on developmentally appropriate conceptions of such success: (1) teachers' views of children's overall social competence (e.g., the middle tier of Fig. 1; see LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996); (2) teachers' views of classroom learning behaviors and feelings about school (e.g., cooperative or independent participation in the classroom, comfort with teacher, school liking; see Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000); (3) children's approaches to learning (e.g., competence motivation, attention/persistence, attitudes toward learning; see Fantuzzo, Perry, & McDermott, 2004); and (4) "harder" data, including achievement, particularly in pre-literary, pre-numeracy, reading, and mathematics, as well as grades and other aspects of the school experience (e.g., retentions, number of disciplinary referrals).

1.2.1. Self-regulation

Self-regulation includes: (1) the ability to handle one's emotions in productive ways, being aware of feelings, monitoring them, and modifying them when necessary so that they aid rather than impede the child's ability to cope with varying situations; and (2) expressing emotions appropriately. At the same time, important non-emotional aspects of self-regulation are paramount to success in the preschool to primary years; these include executive function regulatory skills (e.g.,

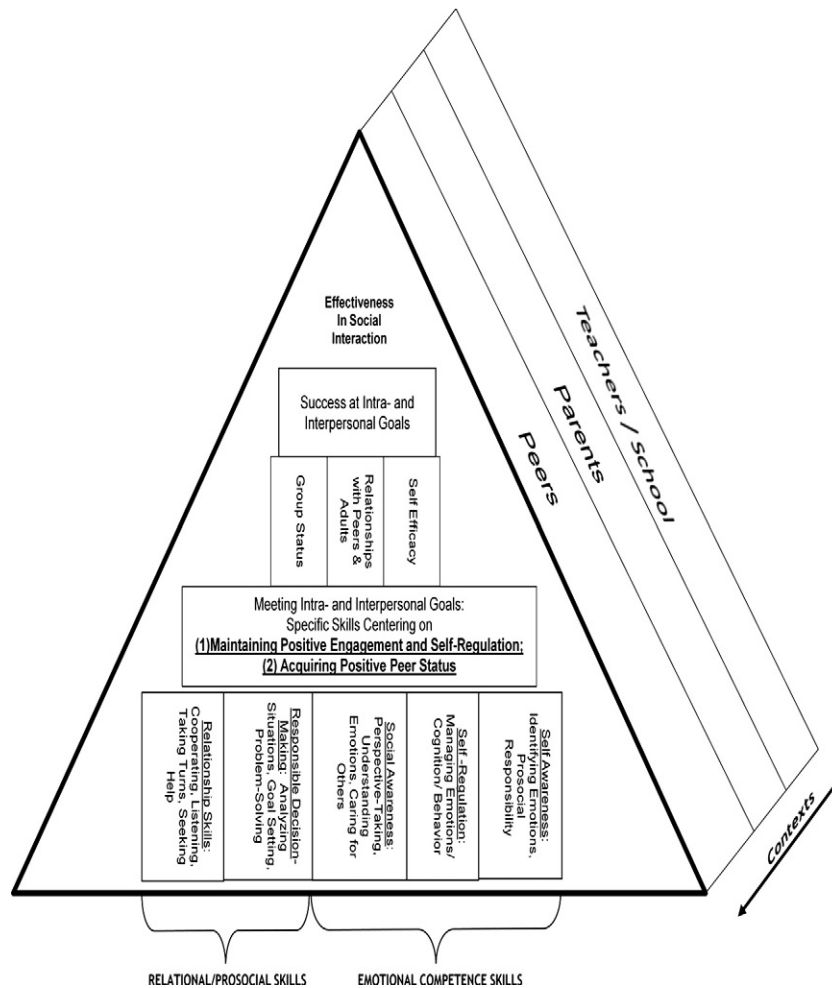


Fig. 1. Adaptation and integration of Rose-Krasnor's (1997) model of social competence and Payton et al. (2000) model of SEL showing specific skills level with emotional competence and relational/prosocial skills specifically delineated.

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