



She's supporting them; who's supporting her? Preschool center-level social-emotional supports and teacher well-being



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ABSTRACT

Preschool teachers across the country have been charged to prepare children socially and emotionally for kindergarten. Teachers working in preschool centers are supporting children's social and emotional learning (SEL) within a rich ecology of emotion and social relationships and the present study considers how the supports implemented for children's SEL at the center-level are associated with teachers' psychological health and workplace experiences. Hierarchical linear models were constructed using data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey 2009 cohort. Results indicate that although teachers work in individual classrooms, they share common perceptions at the center-level of their workplace climate, access to support, and, although to a lesser extent, experience commonalities in psychological health and job satisfaction. Furthermore, in centers that had implemented more supports for children's SEL (including access to mental health consultants, classroom curriculum, and training and resources for teachers) teachers were less depressed, more satisfied with their jobs, felt more supported in managing challenging behavior, and viewed the workplace climate of their center as more positive. Findings are discussed in light of the national efforts to increase and retain a high-quality early childhood workforce.

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1. Introduction

Preschool centers across the country are investing heavily in social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula and professional development opportunities for staff now that SEL is included in the preschool learning standards of all 50 states (Dusenbury et al., 2015). Although numerous reports link SEL interventions and instruction to social and academic gains for children (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011 for a review), a much smaller body of research has considered the interplay among supports for SEL instruction, teacher well-being, and preschool center climate. The present study considers the broad ecology of preschool at the center level that has been reflected in prior theoretical models, including the Prosocial Classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), but not fully explored.

Teachers' abilities to engage in the teaching practices that support SEL are dependent in part on their own well-being, including their social and emotional competencies. Particularly in early childhood education, teachers experience high levels of distress due to poor work conditions, workplace relationships, intrapersonal factors, and challenging child behavior (Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Neuspiel, & Kinsel, 2014). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) incorporated teacher emotional competence into their model of the prosocial classroom, acknowledging the role that a teacher's mental health plays in her ability to support children's

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social-emotional learning. A wellspring of research has confirmed many downstream associations described in the Jennings and Greenberg model. For example, the Chicago School Readiness Project (Raver et al., 2009) and the Head Start Cares Demonstration Project (Morris et al., 2014) have shown that, when done with fidelity, the implementation of such programming can significantly raise children's social and emotional competencies. However, less attention has been paid to the upstream effects of the implementation of supports for children's SEL on the teachers and the climate of the teachers' workplace.

Research into SEL programming and supports that accounts for contextual factors is particularly relevant now given President Obama's call to strengthen the capacity of the early childhood workforce (Slack, 2013), and due to accumulating evidence connecting teachers' workplace experiences and psychological health to turnover and classroom quality (e.g., Jepson & Forrest, 2006; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001). In accordance with dynamic systems theories (Yoshikawa & Hsueh, 2001), and the bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), we conceptualize children in preschools as at the center of a dynamic and complex microsystem that includes key sources of influence that directly and indirectly impact their development. Of particular interest in this study are the influences that preschool centers have on children's development. Specifically, how the policies and practices enacted for the child's benefit at the center-level (e.g., curriculum selection) contribute to teachers' work-place experiences (e.g., center climate, perceptions of support, and job satisfaction), which may in turn influence a teacher's own emotions (e.g., depression) and his or her relationships with children (e.g., perceptions of child behavior).

Nationally, teachers receive little pre-service training in how to support children's SEL (Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015) and access to quality in-service training is highly variable (Jennings & Frank, 2015). Facing pressure to attain SEL learning standards, teachers are often left to their own devices to determine the best course of action and the supports and resources available to them at their center will play a significant role in enabling and encouraging them to support children's SEL. In prior qualitative work, we identified possible ways that preschool center directors' decisions about children's SEL communicated commitments and beliefs to teachers about the value of emotions more broadly (Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Chazan-Cohen, 2016; Zinsser & Zinsser, 2016). Interviews and focus groups with Head Start and private preschool administrators and teachers indicated that directors influence a more global emotional climate of a center—instilling an institutional awareness of, sensitivity to, and valuing of emotions that in turn influences teachers' emotions and their experience of support to engage in social and emotional teaching practices. The present study represents an initial quantitative extension of this qualitative work in order to better understand how the implementation of SEL supports for children impact teachers' well-being at work.

1.1. Social-emotional teaching and learning

SEL describes the process by which children acquire social-emotional skills, including: recognizing their own and others' emotions, managing their emotions, showing social awareness and empathy, forming and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). These competencies set children up for greater success in the realms of social and cognitive development, pre-academic achievement, school readiness, and adjustment (Denham, Zinsser, & Brown, 2010). Given that children develop these social and emotional skills primarily through social interactions at home and school, there is increasing attention to early childhood teachers' influence on SEL (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Horner & Wallace, 2013). The significant attachment-like relationships that preschool teachers form with their students place them in a position to socialize children's emotional competencies (Poulou, 2005).

1.1.1. SEL in the context of head start

Children's social and emotional development has long been central to the Head Start “whole-child” development mission (Goal One Technical Planning Group, 1991). With the reformation of the Head Start program following the congressional reauthorization in 2007, two revisions to the Head Start learning framework have further defined the national program's SEL goals for children as the get ready for kindergarten entry (HSCDEL, 2010; HSELOF, 2015).

Learning standards, such as the Head Start learning framework, are statements about what students should know and be able to do as a result of educational instruction. Well-written standards create consistency in education and communicate priorities to staff, students, and families (Dusenbury et al., 2015). When standards also articulate clear goals and provide developmental benchmarks, as the new 2015 Head Start framework does, they may serve as a powerful plan for education including the implementation of evidence-based curricula and providing high quality professional development for teachers.

Today all states in the U.S. have free-standing SEL standards at the preschool level and in many states, these standards were developed in conjunction with the Head Start learning frameworks (Dusenbury et al., 2011; Dusenbury et al., 2015). Despite the clear learning standards related to preschoolers' SEL within Head Start and across the country, teachers are inconsistently prepared and supported in promoting children's SEL. Preschool centers can support social-emotional teaching and learning in a number of ways. Three such approaches potentially available to Head Start programs at the time this study was conducted include the retention of mental health consultants, the implementation of SEL curricula, and the provision of training and resources related to SEL. Mental health consultants (clinicians, social-workers, play therapists, or other behavioral service providers) typically provide individualized support either in the classroom or during pull-out sessions. Additionally, such consultants can work with teachers and parents to adapt classrooms and/or routines to the specialized emotional or behavioral needs of specific children. A second social-emotional support is the implementation of a universal evidence-based SEL curriculum such as those highlighted in the 2013 CASEL Guide (Domitrovich, Durlak, Goren, & Weissberg, 2013). SEL curriculum (such as Preschool PATHs (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007), Al's Pals (Geller, 1999), and Second Step (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000) promote children's SEL

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