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Profiles of academic/socioemotional competence: Associations with parenting, home, child care, and neighborhood[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Studies have highlighted the need to better understand child development in rural contexts in the first years of life. This study uses a person-centered approach to determine patterns of academic/socioemotional competence profiles at 36 months of age in a sample of 1292 children living in rural poverty in North Carolina and Pennsylvania who participated in the Family Life Project. This study explores factors that contribute to profiles of academic/socioemotional competence, including parenting behavior, and home, child care, and neighborhood environments. Three profiles of academic/socioemotional competence emerged: 1) *Non-Compliant Average Achiever*, 2) *Unengaged Low Achiever*, and 3) *Engaged High Achiever*. These three groups significantly differed on profile indicators and on early parenting behaviors, and home, child care, and neighborhood characteristics. Study findings have implications for understanding the different profiles of young children's academic/socioemotional competence, and the need to strengthen the early care and education environments of children in rural communities.

1. Introduction

Questions are emerging regarding early competencies of children even prior to preschool entry (i.e., academic/socioemotional child competence), as these early competencies set the stage for later school and life success (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Studies of preschool-age children suggest that multiple developmental competencies (i.e., academic and social) work in concert to facilitate or undermine children's success (Duncan et al., 2007). Therefore, children's competencies in the infant/toddler period should be examined in a holistic and integrated way by considering development across multiple domains. This is because academic and socioemotional competencies are, arguably, intertwined in the first few years of life (Daily, Burkhauser, & Halle, 2010), and they require similar levels of self-regulatory capacities such as environmental appraisals and self-monitoring (Wentzel, 1991). Various factors facilitate these early childhood competencies, including children's home, school, and community environments. There is particular

urgency to understand these factors in rural communities because of the unique opportunities (e.g., less crime and more community cohesion compared to urban settings) and challenges (e.g., limited access to resources compared to urban settings) of these contexts. In this study, we used an integrative person-centered approach to determine patterns of children's academic/socioemotional competence at 36 months of age. This integrative person-centered approach illustrates nuances and reveals profiles with respect to how a child develops across multiple domains simultaneously, thus providing an alternative to a variable-centered approach, which focuses on generalized associations between variables across a sample and on central tendency, ignoring heterogeneity within a population (Marsh, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Morin, 2009). It also seeks to uncover how proximal processes and distal settings, such as rural communities, play a role in young children's academic/socioemotional patterns at 36 months, an important time period before preschool and formal schooling.

Using data from the Family Life Project, a longitudinal study of

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children born in rural, low-wealth counties in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, we sought to identify profiles of academic/socioemotional competence using multiple methods (observation, direct assessments and ratings) and multi-informant (teachers, parents) and contextual factors that might contribute to specific profiles. Extensive research, summarized below, links parenting behavior, and home, child care, and neighborhood environment to children's development in early childhood; however, less is known about how these characteristics predict different patterns of development, which may be used to better tailor early intervention efforts. Exploring these relations in rural communities is crucial as these communities by definition are more isolated, with barriers such as geographic distance resulting in limited access to formal child care, living-wage jobs, social services, and physical health, mental health, and recreational opportunities (Weber, Duncan, & Whitener, 2002). On the other hand, rural communities benefit from less exposure to violent crime, more access to extended family, stronger connections to religious institutions, a greater sense of community, and a strong emphasis on family and relationships (Durham & Smith, 2006). Nonetheless, relative to children growing up in urban areas, children in rural communities are likely to start formal schooling with fewer literacy, math, and social-emotional skills (Sheridan, Koziol, Clarke, Rispoli, & Coutts, 2014).

1.1. Theoretical framework

Children's early skills are intimately interrelated. For example, studies show that children's socioemotional skills build on their language skills and vice versa (Daily et al., 2010). Aligned with this concept, in this study we view young children's academic/socioemotional competencies as interrelated cognitive, regulatory, and social school readiness skills that children are developing which impact their later development. Blair (2002) also notes that as children's regulatory skills are nascent in the early years, they are nevertheless the underlying mechanism supporting cognitive and social behaviors associated with school achievement. This view aligns with Cunha's and Heckman's (2008) production of human capability model and Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, which provide a framework for young children's academic/socioemotional competence and the influence of multi-level contextual factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Cunha and Heckman's (2008) production of human capabilities model emphasizes the synergy between cognitive (i.e., academic) and non-cognitive (i.e., socioemotional) skills in support of school and life outcomes. In particular, they note that during the first few years of life children "have endowments of cognitive potential and temperament" (Claessens, Duncan, & Engel, 2009, p. 417) which are impacted by genetics, as well as families, communities, and preschool programs, and schools. These influencers support children's cognitive and non-cognitive development that produce adult human capital by providing more language and cognitive rich interactions and opportunities, which are thought to help children's academic and social skills. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's model emphasizes the notion that children's development is shaped by reciprocal interactions with persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate external environment, which make up the microsystem. While interactions in the microsystems of the home and the child care settings for children of this age (or proximal processes) are primary, other interactive systems, such as the community also impact children through their effect on these proximal processes. For example, studies have shown that the dispersion of services and limited work employment impacts parents' time and ability to provide stimulating interactions for their child (Vernon-Feagans, Gallagher, & Kainz, 2008). Each of these systems, individually and jointly, shapes human development. As the child grows, the microsystem extends beyond the home to other individuals, groups, and social settings in which the child is a direct participant, including child care, school, and the community (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Thus, in this study we seek to understand the extent to which the microsystem (e.g., families, child care programs)

and macrosystem (e.g., rural neighborhood) are potentially associated with patterns of children's academic/socioemotional competence.

1.2. Determining factors associated with child academic/socioemotional competence patterns

As noted by models presented by Bronfenbrenner and Cunha and Heckman, parenting behavior, and home, child care, and neighborhood characteristics are likely to influence young children's academic/socioemotional competence. The home environment has been associated with children's preschool (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAdoo, & García Coll, 2001; Iruka, 2009) and later outcomes (Davis-Kean, 2005). Specifically, a home environment that is cognitively stimulating supports children's language and cognitive development through the provision of enriching opportunities and interactions. Parenting has also been linked to children's adjustment across development. When characterized by warm, supportive, and sensitive interactions, parenting has been shown to facilitate children's socioemotional adjustment, including their executive function; while parenting characterized by harsh, inconsistent, and less sensitive parenting has been linked to early problem behaviors (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010; Deater-Deckard, Ivy, & Petrill, 2006). Some studies have suggested that due to the limited community resources in rural settings, parents may not have the necessary tools to provide cognitively stimulating experiences and compounded with fewer high-paying jobs with non-standard hours, this may result in parents having less time available to spend with their children (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013).

Child care quality is also associated with child outcomes (e.g., Zaslow et al., 2016) across development. For example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD) found that higher quality child care was related to better cognitive-academic performance at preschool, and these benefits were evident in early and later elementary school, as well as at age 15 (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, Vitiello, & Greenberg, 2014; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010). Some findings, albeit weak, have found some links between classroom quality and executive function, especially classrooms that provide opportunities for interactions and higher order thinking (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). When examined within the context of rural communities, evidence has shown that children in these communities are less likely to have access to higher quality center-based programs. Center-based programs which are generally found to be of higher quality tend to be less accessible to children in rural settings for various reasons including not offering hours that meet parents' needs and potentially families' preference for home-based care (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013).

Multiple studies have found a relation between neighborhood factors, such as aggregate income, education level, and crime, and child language and academic competence and performance (Barbarin et al., 2006). The level of trust and cohesion among neighbors (i.e., collective efficacy/socialization) has been associated with increased authoritative parenting, which, in turn, served to deter affiliation with deviant peers and delinquent behavior among older children (Simons, Simons, Burt, Brody, & Cutrona, 2005). Another neighborhood characteristic, geographic isolation, is an indicator of how far one lives from jobs, shopping outlets, and public institutions and may be a risk factor given less access to services, or a protective factor given less exposure to drugs, violence, and other social ills (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, Cox, & The Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2008). Mixed findings exist regarding the link between geographic isolation and child outcomes, with one study noting that it exacerbated the experience of poverty (Atchinson, 2001) and another showing it as a protective factor by buffering children from community risks, such as unemployment and illicit activities (Burchinal et al., 2008). One study showed that while child moves in early childhood were associated with poor self-regulation, it was moderated by neighborhood poverty (Roy, McCoy, & Raver,

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