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Reductions in aggressive behavior within the context of a universal, social emotional learning program: Classroom- and student-level mechanisms[☆]

Sam Portnow^{a,*}, Jason T. Downer^a, Joshua Brown^b

^a Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, University of Virginia, United States

^b Department of Psychology, Fordham University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The present study uses data from 35 third through fifth-grade urban classrooms and 531 students to examine the extent to which student-level social and emotional skills (e.g., low hostile attribution bias and low aggressive interpersonal negotiation strategies) and emotionally supportive learning environments predict aggressive behavior over the course of a school year. Results of multiple regression analyses indicated that across teacher-reported measures of aggressive behavior, more classroom emotional support over the course of the school year predicted less aggressive behavior in spring, particularly for children whose hostile attribution bias decreased over the course of the year. According to a child-reported measure of aggressive behavior, declines in aggressive interpersonal negotiation strategies over the course of the year also predicted less aggressive behavior in spring. Moreover, these results operated similarly across all children. Implications for SEL programs are discussed.

1. Introduction

Educators, policymakers, and the general public agree that schools play an important role in fostering socially and emotionally intelligent youth (Elias, 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Learning First Alliance, 2001; Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2004). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs – those that help children to recognize and manage emotions, build empathy, and resolve conflict constructively (Elias et al., 1997) – are helping schools to attain this goal. A recent meta-analysis of over 200 different SEL programs by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) showed that students who participated in a universal, school-based SEL program demonstrated improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behavior compared to students who did not participate in a universal SEL program. A subset of these SEL programs also collected academic information, and results suggested that students in these programs had an 11 percentile point gain in achievement.

In order to inform SEL practice, the present study focused on understanding how changes in individual and classroom level processes relate to changes in aggressive behavior and conduct problems over the course of a school year. We focused on these behaviors because they place students at risk for intermediary challenges in school, such as conflict with teachers (Doumen et al.,

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* Corresponding author at: Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, University of Virginia, PO Box 800784, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0784, United States.

E-mail address: sam.portnow@gmail.com (S. Portnow).

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, United States.

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2008) and rejection by other students (Dodge, Coie, Pettit, & Price, 1990), as well as negative long-term outcomes, such as academic failure, school dropout, and juvenile delinquency (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Hinshaw, 1992; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999).

Theoretically, SEL programs foster reductions in aggression and conduct problems through two complementary pathways that operate at both an individual (i.e., student) and setting (i.e., classroom) level: (a) improving students' social and emotional skills through direct instruction (Izard, 2002; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2004) and (b) creating safe and caring learning environments – termed emotionally supportive learning environments in the present study – through teacher training (Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004; Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004). Yet, at present, it is unclear how these targets of SEL programs relate to aggressive behavior and conduct problems. Are students' social and emotional skills or learning environments more strongly associated with aggressive behavior and conduct problems? Or, are both related just as strongly? While researchers posit that some combination of student, teacher, and classroom level improvements produce gains in children's social and emotional skills and academic achievement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Schaps et al., 2004, as cited in Durlak et al., 2011), relatively few empirical studies have attempted to disentangle these relations. In the context of 35 urban third, fourth, and fifth-grade classrooms and 531 students, the present study investigated the individual contribution of improvements in a specific social and emotional skill (i.e., cognitive appraisals) to aggressive behavior and conduct problems over the course of a school year, as well as the individual contribution of fostering supportive classrooms. Moreover, the present study investigated the interactive contribution of improvements in cognitive appraisals and fostering supportive classrooms.

1.1. Contribution of social-emotional skills to reduced aggression

Social-information processing theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994) posits that cognitive appraisals are a social-emotional skill, which serve as a potential causal link between risk for committing aggressive acts and the actual execution of them (Jones, Brown, & Lawrence Aber, 2011). According to this theory, students undergo five steps before responding to an event embedded within a social situation: (1) encoding of cues within the situation, (2) interpretation of those cues, (3) clarification of goals, (4) access to possible responses, and (5) selection of a response. Although students who engage in aggressive behavior and display conduct problems may show deficits at each step, the present study focused on deficits at steps two, the interpretation of cues, and four, the access of possible responses (Crick & Dodge, 1994). These steps fall within the core SEL competencies developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). More specifically, step two falls under social awareness, whereas step four falls under both relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003). Disruptive students display a hostile attribution bias (HAB), interpreting potentially benign cues (i.e., another student bumps them in the lunch line) as aggressive (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980; Dodge, 1986a, 1986b; Guerra & Slaby, 1989; Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1980). In addition, these students more frequently choose aggressive interpersonal negotiation strategies over prosocial interpersonal strategies in response to hypothetical problem-solving situations (Leadbeater, Hellner, Allen, & Aber, 1989). As a result of such faulty cognitive appraisals, these students are more likely to react aggressively toward others. In the context of SEL programs, students have experienced reductions in hostile attribution bias and the selection of aggressive interpersonal negotiation strategies (Jones et al., 2011; Jones, Brown, Hoglund, & Aber, 2010), as well as reductions in aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Dodge & Godwin, 2013; Jones et al., 2011). However, little work has been done to unpack and test the theory of change by which changes in key social-cognitive processes are related to students' reductions in aggression.

1.2. The role of emotionally supportive learning environments in prevention of aggression

In addition to evidence that improving students' social-emotional skills reduces aggressive behavior and conduct problems, there is also an abundance of evidence to suggest that fostering emotionally supportive learning environments contributes to the amelioration of disruptive behavior. Although students' perceptions of the classroom are important indicators of the classroom environment (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Fraser & O'Brien, 1985), the present study focused on observational methods. In the current study, an emotionally supportive classroom is characterized by observer-rated warmth and sensitivity to students' differing perspectives and needs, positive relationships between students and the teacher, and a lack of anger and hostility (NICHD ECCRN, 2002). Emotionally supportive learning environments may predict reductions in aggression because within these environments, teachers model effective social interactions, encourage appropriate emotional responses, and give their students individualized attention (Domínguez, Vitiello, Fuccillo, Greenfield, & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2011; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Johnson, Seidenfled, Izard, & Kobak, 2013). Indeed, teacher-reported teacher-child closeness is associated with reductions in aggression (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2010), and observed higher emotional and instructional support is associated with less interpersonal behavior problems (Perry, Donohue, & Weinstein, 2007). Moreover, observed emotional support predicts increases in social competence over the course of the year, as well as reductions in aggressive and antisocial behavior (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008).

1.3. Student and classroom level factors operating together to reduce aggression

Although it is unclear from the SEL literature whether improvement of students' social and emotional skills, fostering emotionally supportive classrooms, or both predict reductions in aggressive and antisocial behavior, work by Domitrovich et al. (2016) and Webster-Stratton et al. (2004) indicate that both may be at play. In a study of 350 K-5 teachers across 27 schools, Domitrovich and colleagues examined the effects of two interventions on teacher beliefs and perceptions: (1) a classroom behavior management

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