



Individual children's interactions with teachers, peers, and tasks: The applicability of the inCLASS Pre-K in Danish preschools

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ABSTRACT

Social competence in a preschool setting, defined as children's success in interacting with peers and teachers, and showing adaptive classroom and task-related behavior, has shown to be predictive of subsequent positive social-emotional, academic, and school outcomes. Social competence is partly viewed as an individual skill, but is also shaped by the environmental and cultural context, resulting from the classroom experiences, activities, and interactions that are provided to children. Evaluating children's social competence as expressed in day-to-day contexts requires an appropriate tool that takes into account the interactional nature of this behavior. The inCLASS Pre-K is such an observational tool, developed in the United States (U.S.) that assesses individual children's classroom interactions with peers, teachers and tasks. The aims of the current study are threefold: i) to investigate the applicability of the inCLASS Pre-K in Danish preschools constituting a different cultural context, ii) to assess children's broad social competence by looking at their interactions with peers, teachers and tasks, iii) to study the extent to which the inCLASS Pre-K is capturing individual differences in children, depending on their age, gender and language background. A total of 184 children of 81 classrooms were observed on two occasions. The results supported the applicability of the inCLASS Pre-K in Denmark by confirming the four-factor structure reported in previous studies, and in line with previous work revealing small to moderate stability both within one day and across two observation days, and good inter-rater reliability. Danish children showed a higher quality of interactions with peers and lower quality interactions with the teacher as compared to results from the U.S. and Germany. The findings revealed only few individual differences between children in which boys had more conflict interactions than girls. In addition, older children scored lower on peer interactions and task orientation and higher on conflict interactions compared to younger children, although these associations decreased or disappeared when controlling for the mean age of children in the classroom. Interestingly, individual children's interactions with the teacher, peers, and materials showed moderate classroom level variance, which might in part explain the lack of stronger individual differences. Altogether, this supports the notion that children's social competence in the classroom is at least in part a situated skill that is shaped by the environment and cultural context. Contrary to the U.S., which seems to more strongly reflect a dyadic model of teacher-child interactions in teacher-directed (learning) activities, the findings from Denmark illustrate a model of preschool education with a stronger emphasis on free play and social peer interactions. Overall, the findings from this study support the applicability of the inCLASS Pre-K in Denmark and enhance our understanding on what classroom quality looks like from an individual child's perspective and, as such, is informative in improving educational practices.

1. Introduction

Preschool provides a social context outside of the home environment in which children have the opportunity to interact with teachers and peers (Fabes, Hanish, & Martin, 2003). Moreover, in this group-based setting children have to meet behavioral and academic demands and show socially adaptive classroom behavior. In her theoretical

model, Rose-Krasnor (1997) identified three levels of children's social competence. On the highest, theoretical, level, social competence is broadly defined as 'effectiveness in social interaction' referring to a set of behaviors organized to meet short and long term developmental needs, which are shaped by interactions with the environment. The second level, referred to as the index level, consists of situation-specific and contextual indices of social competence, such as friendships and

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social self-efficacy (i.e. meeting personal goals while maintaining interpersonal connectedness to others) that take into account the transactional nature of children's behavior. Contrary to this social level, the third level, named the skills level, captures the individual variation in children's social skills, including the behaviors and motivations or building blocks for social competence, such as perspective taking, empathy or social problem solving. Rose-Krasnor (1997) suggests that on the conceptual level social competence can be viewed as a universal construct, but cultural variability is more likely to occur at the index level, where social competence is constructed in interaction with the environment, and the skills level, as the behavior required for social competence might differ between cultures. Likewise, Rogoff (2003), in her cultural model of human development, illustrates the role of context, specifically culture, in children's development and the way social interactions take place. She states that individual development is inseparable from the social and socio-historical context the individual is part of, as the activities and practices an individual is part of contribute to the person's behavior in everyday life. At the index level identified by Rose-Krasnor (1997), for instance, cultural differences can become evident in classroom interactions. For example, work by Rogoff (2003) showed that in European American cultures interactions tend to be dyadic in nature in contrast to group-based interactions in Mayan cultures. This dyadic interaction model is also reflected in school practices in the U.S. where children take turns in answering the teacher, whereas in Alaskan and Japanese classrooms calling upon individual children is less common and a group-oriented approach is used in which children are encouraged to build on each other's ideas in discussions. Consequently, children's classroom experiences and interactions with peers and adults might differ between cultures and countries, which in turn may affect opportunities for the development of social competence and classroom behavior that is considered desirable in that particular context.

At the index level of social competence, several studies have demonstrated that the quality of individual children's interactions with both teachers and peers were related to higher academic achievement, more adaptive learning behavior, and better self-regulation (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Also, children showing more task-persistence and self-reliant behavior during activities or tasks showed higher academic skills and better emotion regulation (Fantuzzo, Perry, & McDermott, 2004; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000).

A recently developed observational tool tapping into social competence is the individualized Classroom Assessment Scoring System Pre-K, which evaluates three aspects of preschooler's interactions and classroom experiences with teachers, peers, and tasks (inCLASS Pre-K; Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010). The inCLASS Pre-K was developed in the U.S. and has been validated in several U.S. studies (e.g., Booren, Downer, & Vitiello, 2012; Downer et al., 2010; Vitiello, Booren, Downer, & Williford, 2012; Williford, Vick Wittaker, Vitiello, & Downer, 2013). However, an important question is whether an observational tool developed in a country within a particular preschool context, is also applicable in another cultural context. To date, evidence on the psychometric properties of the inCLASS Pre-K in countries outside the U.S. is limited to Germany that generally supported the applicability of the inCLASS Pre-K, but also showed few differences that might reflect cultural differences (von Suchodoletz, Gunzenhauser, & Larsen, 2015). For example, conflicts with the teachers appeared very rare in German preschools. Overall, preschoolers' quality of interactions with the teacher and with peers appeared lower in Germany compared to the U.S. validation study (Downer et al., 2010), but more comparable with the findings of two other U.S. studies (Vitiello, Moas, Henderson, Greenfield, & Munis, 2012; Williford et al., 2013). A closer look at the patterns of interactions shows that, on average, the quality of interactions with the teacher was lower than the quality of peer interactions. However, this difference was much larger in the German sample than in

the U.S. samples (more than one standard deviation for Germany compared to one third to about half a standard deviation). The mean scores for teacher interactions appeared quite comparable across these studies, but the mean score for peer interactions was higher in Germany suggesting a different pattern of interactions in Germany that might reflect cultural differences in preschool practices (von Suchodoletz et al., 2015). Following Rose-Krasnor's model, the current study contributes to our understanding of what children's social competence looks like in Danish preschoolers by investigating the quality of interactions with teachers, peers and tasks, reflecting the index level of social competence, using the inCLASS Pre-K and the extent to which this tool is capturing individual differences, representing the skills level. The study starts out by investigating the applicability of the inCLASS Pre-K in a different cultural context, as will be outlined below.

1.1. Preschool in the Danish context

Denmark provides universal preschool with an enrollment rate of 98% of all three-to-five year olds (Statistics Denmark, 2015). Denmark, like many European countries, provides a preschool context that typically emphasizes children's social-emotional development, as opposed to a focus on pre-academic skills, and is characterized by a holistic and strong free-play oriented curriculum with little time spent on formal instruction (Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Rasmussen, 2014; Sylva, Ereky-Stevens, & Aricescu, 2015). Denmark does not have a national curriculum, but curricula are locally defined, usually at the center level. With a new legislation implemented in 2004, all preschools are obliged to formulate so-called 'learning plans' focusing on six broad themes: children's all-round individual development, social competence, language development, body and movement, nature and natural phenomena, and cultural expressions and values (Sylva et al., 2015). This Danish legislation reflects a broad concept of learning through free play, creativity and outdoor activities within a social and inclusive context (Bauchmüller et al., 2014; Jensen, 2009). The importance of learning through social interaction and play rather than in structured instructional situations, such as circle time or academic activities, was revealed in a large-scale survey among 1340 Danish teachers (Broström, Johansson, Sandberg, & Frøkjær, 2012). Consequently, the stronger focus on social-emotional learning using a free and play-based approach might affect children's experiences and interactions with both the teacher and peers, thus exposing them to a different preschool environment than for instance in the U.S.

1.2. Children's classroom interactions: inCLASS Pre-K

Children's classroom experiences related to social interactions and their engagement with tasks, as part of the broader construct of social competence, are viewed as important elements of early learning and development (Vitiello, Moas et al., 2012). The inCLASS Pre-K distinguishes three different domains relevant to capture children's classroom experiences, referring to the index level of Rose-Krasnor's (1997) social competence model. The first domain, Teacher Interactions, focuses on two dimensions: Positive Engagement assesses the emotional closeness with the teacher and the extent to which the teacher uses the teacher as a secure base; Teacher Communication evaluates the degree to which the child initiates and maintains language interactions with the teacher for a variety of purposes, including social and practical. The second domain, Peer Interactions, includes three dimensions: Peer Sociability reflect the extent to which the child seeks out peers and shares positive emotions and behaviors; Peer Communication includes the extent to which the child initiates and maintains language interactions with peers for a variety of purposes, including social and practical; Peer Assertiveness focuses on the initiation and maintenance of peer interactions and expressed leadership and self-confidence in these interactions. The third domain encompasses two dimensions: Engagement within Tasks assesses the extent to which the child is actively involved in activities

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