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Article

Inequalities in socio-emotional development and positive parenting during childhood: Evidence from China 2010–2014

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A B S T R A C T

Socio-emotional development (SED) is a critical dimension of early childhood development (ECD). However, little research has been conducted thus far regarding inequalities across family income status in children's SED and positive parenting scores in China, which has the second largest population of children in the world. Using nationally representative data from the China Family Panel Survey (CFPS), we addressed this knowledge gap by assessing the levels and trends of inequalities in children's SED scores and positive parenting scores across wealth quintiles between 2010 and 2014. Positive parenting was measured for (1) children aged two and younger (PP_younger) and (2) children between the ages of three and five (PP_older). We adopted five inequality measures, including both absolute and relative measures. We found that, between 2010 and 2014, SED scores significantly increased for all five wealth quintiles, with the first quintile (Q1, the lowest income) growing the fastest. Consequently, observed inequalities in SED scores between Q1 and the fifth wealth quintile (Q5, the highest income) no longer existed in 2014. For the two parenting scores, we observed a significant reduction in inequality between Q1 and Q5, from 1.03 (95% CI: 0.71–1.35) in 2010 to 0.51 (95% CI: 0.27–0.74) in 2014 for PP_younger and from 1.28 (95% CI: 1.09–1.47) in 2010 to 0.53 (95% CI: 0.37–0.70) in 2014 for PP_older. These changes are due to larger increases in scores for children in Q1 compared to Q5 during this time period. These results are highly consistent over different inequality measurements and indicate that both the absolute level and the equality status of young children's SED score and parenting score experienced improvement during the study period. This suggests that China's large investments since 2010 in pre-primary education may have yielded their desired results. Future research should further investigate the association between positive parenting and SED.

Introduction

Childhood is a formative stage of life, critical to an individual's future health, academic achievement, productivity, and success (Belli, Bustreo, & Preker, 2017; Chang, Walker, Grantham-McGregor, & Powell, 2017; Glewwe, Jacoby, & King, 2017; Currie, Stabile, Manivong, & Roos, 2017; Victora et al., 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) prioritizes improving early childhood development (ECD) as a primary focus for the next 15 years (World Health Organization, 2016; Barros, Ewerling, Lombardi, Barros, & Strupp, 2017), with equality being a central tenet of the SDG era (World Health Organization, 2016; Barros et al., 2017).

Socio-emotional development (SED) is a fundamental part of a child's overall health and well-being, as it impacts brain

development and later-life outcomes in mental and physical health, such as school performance, productivity, etc (Aratani & Cooper., 2017; Evans & English, 2017; Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2017; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2017; Denham, 2017). Inequalities in SED can impose the severe challenge of a lack of "equity from the start," and place children in poor families in a vicious circle of poverty (Marmot, Friel, Bell, Houweling, & Taylor, 2017; World Health Organization, 2018). There is mounting evidence from developed countries showing that children's SED scores are significantly higher if their parents are white, better educated, have higher social class, or if their families are wealthier (McLoyd, 1990; Chaux, Molano, & Podlesky, 2009; Votruba-drzal, 2006). However, inequalities in children's SED in developing countries remain mostly unexplored, largely due to a lack of available data.

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Recent studies seeking to understand the determinants of children's SED found that parents' investing time into performing enriching activities with their children is an important predictor of children's SED (Anthony et al., 2017; Weisleder et al., 2017; Weisleder et al., 2017; Calderon, 2000; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Evidence from the United States shows that economically advantaged parents display more optimal parenting behaviors by spending more time engaging their children in developmentally enhancing activities, while parents from lower-income families tend to let their children develop without concerted parental intervention (McLoyd, 1990; Lareau, 2011). However, as is the case with most research on inequalities in childhood SED, the vast majority of studies on positive parenting inequalities originated in developed countries, leaving a dearth of information regarding such disparities in developing countries. Our study aims to address this knowledge gap by measuring the inequalities in children's SED and positive parenting scores by wealth quintile using nationally-representative data from the China Family Panel Study (CFPS).

China had 86 million children under five years old in 2015, accounting for 13% of the world under five population (United Nations, 2017). According to a recent study, while China has made progress in reducing the number of children under age five who are at risk of poor early development, it remained the country with the second largest number of at risk children (17 million [nearly 20%] of young children in China) in 2010, behind India (Lu, Black, & Richter, 2017). In 2010, the Chinese Ministry of Education, in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), launched its first national early childhood advocacy month and explicitly prioritized early childhood development (UNICEF, 2018). Since 2010, the Chinese government has increased its financial investments in early childhood education and preschool/kindergarten education, from 36.1 billion yuan (around \$5.3 billion USD) in 2010 to 90.3 billion yuan (around \$30.3 billion USD) in 2014.¹ (Ministry of Education of The People's Republic of China, 2015; National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China, 2018) To understand the progress in children's socio-emotional development between 2010 and 2014, this study takes advantage of the CFPS data at the national level and investigates the levels and trends of inequalities in children's SED and positive parenting scores in China.

Methods and measures

Sample

We obtained data on children's wealth status, SED, positive parenting scores, and children's socioeconomic and demographic characteristics from the CFPS. The CFPS is the first nationally representative survey designed to characterize China's ongoing social transformation by collecting data at the community, family, and individual levels (Xie & Hu, 2018). The CFPS was first launched in 2010 and has since been conducted every two years. We obtained the CFPS data from 2010, 2012, and 2014. A total of 10,236 records were generated across all three years of data collection for children aged 0–5 years old (0–59 months), including 3343 children in 2010, 3411 children in 2012, 3482 children in 2014. The number of observations for each research indicator is presented in Table 1. CFPS did not track a cohort of children for their socio-emotional development and positive parenting over time, but conducted surveys on children of the same age in different survey rounds. Therefore, different cohorts were interviewed in each survey round for SED and parenting questions. Thusly, we treated CFPS data as cross-sectional in this study.

¹ The exchange rate of 2010: 100 USD = 676.95 RMB; The exchange rate of 2014: 100 USD = 614.28 RMB.

Table 1
Numbers of children involved in the analysis.

	2010	2012	2014
Socio-emotional health score (aged 3)	598	660	629
Positive parenting score for children aged 1–2	1290	1209	1258
Positive parenting score for children aged 3–5	1759	1838	1830

Measures

Wealth quintiles

The CFPS constructs household wealth based on the monetary value of household assets, including housing assets, financial assets (e.g., savings, stock, funds, bonds, etc.), agricultural machinery, business assets, detailed items of durable goods (valuables included), and liabilities from housing and other sources (Xie & Jin, 2017). This variable was generated by the CFPS in its 2010 and 2012 data and has been used in previous studies to measure household's socio-economic status (Xie & Jin, 2017; Xu & Xie, 2017; Villas-Boas, Fu, & Judge, 2018). Following the method and formula provided by the CFPS, we calculated total wealth for each household in 2014. Total household wealth was adjusted with GDP inflator to ensure its comparability across the three years. We then calculated household wealth per capita, which was total household wealth divided by household size. After obtaining household wealth per capita, we followed previous practices and separated all interviewed households into five wealth quintiles for each survey wave (Tan, Zeng, & Zhu, 2011).

Socio-emotional development (SED)

Numerous previous studies have adopted Positive Behavior Scale (PBS) scores as a measurement of SED (Epps, Eun, Aletha, Huston, & Ripke, 2017; The Child Development Supplement, 2017). The CFPS adopted a 10-item version of the PBS (The Child Development Supplement, 2017). The items are: 1) "This child is cheerful, happy" 2) "This child waits for his/her turn while playing or doing other activities" 3) "This child does things very carefully and in order." 4) "This child is curious and likes to explore." 5) "This child thinks first before acting and is not impulsive." 6) "This child gets on well with others his/her age." 7) "This child usually does what you tell him/her to do." 8) "This child can get over being upset quickly." 9) "This child is admired and well-liked by others his/her age." 10) "This child tries to do things for him/herself and is self-reliant." Answers from the respondents (the caregivers) are classified into five categories, including "1 Totally disagree," "2 Disagree," "3 Neither agree nor disagree," "4 Agree," and "5 Totally agree." We followed previous practices and generated a composite SED score, which is the average of scores attached to the items (Epps et al., 2017; The Child Development Supplement, 2017).

In 2010 and 2012, only children three years old were surveyed with the PBS questions; in 2014, all children aged three to five years old were surveyed with PBS questions. To track changes in inequalities in SED over the study period, we only included children three years old (a totally of 1887 children across the three waves). Sample size in each year is presented in Table 1.

Positive parenting

The CFPS contains two instruments to measure positive parenting for children at two age groups: 1) positive parenting for children aged 2 or younger [PP_younger], and 2) positive parenting for children between ages 3 and 5 [PP_older]. PP_younger is measured with three items regarding the frequency caregivers use toys/games/other things to help the child 1) learn numbers, 2) distinguish colors, and 3) distinguish shapes. PP_older is measured with four items about the frequency of the caregivers 1) reading to the child, 2) buying books for the child, 3) taking the child out to play, and 4) using toys/games/other things to help the child learn characters. The

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