



## Absenteeism in Appalachian preschool classrooms and children's academic achievement<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined preschool absenteeism for children ( $N = 451$ ) in classrooms in rural areas of Appalachia. A substantial portion of children (47.5%) were chronically absent (missing 10% or more of the school year). The current study focuses on preschool children's developing language and literacy skills that are foundational for future reading and school success. Findings revealed that children who were frequently absent, particularly those who were chronically absent, exhibited fewer gains in literacy over the academic year. No effect of absenteeism was uncovered for language growth. Instructional quality was examined as a moderator of absenteeism and achievement. The effects of absenteeism on children's language and literacy outcomes did not vary as a function of instructional quality. Implications and future directions are discussed.

### Introduction

Though several studies have examined elementary absenteeism, few studies have explored the consequences of preschool absences (Ansari & Purtell, 2017). However, the competencies developed in preschool are critical for success in elementary school, with academic skills at kindergarten entry associated with future academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007). Given that patterns of absenteeism form in the early years of schooling (Romero & Lee, 2007), examining preschool attendance may also be beneficial in efforts to reduce absenteeism in the later years of schooling. A recent study of preschool children attending Head Start classrooms found that greater absences are associated with limited academic growth in early childhood classrooms (Ansari & Purtell, 2017). Among the nationally representative sample of children enrolled in Head Start classrooms, children in Head Start missed 5.5% of the school year on average. Twelve percent of Head Start children were chronically absent and missed an average of 22 days of the school year. To our knowledge, no studies have examined preschool attendance in rural regions. However, given that children in rural settings often require transportation over length distances to get to school, relative to urban and suburban children who more frequently can walk or bike to school (McDonald, 2007), we might expect absenteeism to be an issue in these settings. For instance, lack of reliable transportation in rural

settings might increase absenteeism among preschool-aged children whose parents must transport them to school.

### Effects of absenteeism

Research on absenteeism in the elementary grades suggests that children who are frequently absent are more likely to perform poorly on measures of academic achievement than their peers with consistent school attendance (Attridge, 2016; Chang & Romero, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2007). In addition to the academic consequences, increased absences are linked to poorer socioemotional outcomes. Teacher ratings indicate that children who are chronically absent, namely those who miss 10% or more of the school year (two days per month), demonstrate more negative approaches to learning, greater internalizing problems, and less eagerness to learn (Gottfried, 2014). Absenteeism is particularly detrimental for children who enter the school year with fewer academic skills and for children living in poverty (Chang & Romero, 2008). The families of low-income children are more likely to lack the resources to make up for losses in instructional time.

Attendance in the first years of schooling may be particularly important given that patterns of absenteeism develop in the early elementary school years. Data indicate that the frequency of absences in elementary school years is associated with attendance in future grades

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(Attridge, 2016; Romero & Lee, 2007). Further, children who miss greater numbers of school days throughout their academic careers are more likely to eventually drop out of school (Schoeneberger, 2012). In addition to the negative effects of absenteeism on the individuals' missing school, children's absenteeism may be detrimental to their classmates' learning experiences. As teachers help children frequently returning from absences, the pace of classroom instruction might be impacted and negatively influence the learning experiences of the other students. Previous research suggests children with chronically absent classmates exhibit poorer reading and math outcomes (Gottfried, 2015).

Children who were frequently absent in preschool made fewer gains in literacy and math during the preschool year. Studies by Logan, Piasta, Justice, Schatschneider, and Petrill (2011) and Hubbs-Tait et al. (2002) found no general association between attendance and language. However, Logan et al. (2011) found that instructional quality moderated the relationship between attendance and children's language growth. These results suggest that the effects of absenteeism vary as a function of instructional quality with greater attendance associated with larger language gains for preschool children attending high quality classrooms. Previous research suggests children enrolled in high-quality preschool programs were more likely to show greater gains in language and literacy skills than children who attended low-quality programs (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007). Thus, children who are frequently absent are exposed to fewer teacher interactions that promote growth in language and literacy and have limited opportunities to benefit from high-quality preschool education programs.

#### *Preschool attendance in urban areas*

Recent studies indicate preschool absenteeism is especially problematic in large, urban districts. A substantial portion of children attending preschool in urban settings are considered to be chronically absent, defined as missing 10% or more of the school year (Dubay & Holla, 2016). Chronic absenteeism rates in preschool have been documented across several cities with chronic absenteeism rates ranging from 36%–45% in Chicago, 20%–27% in Baltimore, and 35%–37% in the District of Columbia (Connolly & Olson, 2012; Dubay & Holla, 2016; Ehrlich, Gwynne, Pareja, & Allensworth, 2014). Multiple factors, including race, income, and English Language Learner status are associated with preschool attendance. For example, African American children were more likely to be chronically absent than white or Latino children in Chicago (Ehrlich et al., 2014). Additionally, children of all races/ethnicities living in neighborhoods with high poverty levels were at an elevated risk of chronic absenteeism in preschool. English Language Learners were less likely to be chronically absent.

#### *Preschool attendance in rural areas*

Though there have been some studies of absenteeism among young children living in urban areas, there are several important distinctions between urban and rural settings that might limit the generalizability of research findings on preschool attendance to the millions of children in rural areas. Children and families in rural areas face a distinct set of stressors as compared to families residing in urban contexts. Rural settings are characterized by high levels of poverty and limited employment opportunities (Vernon-Feagans, Burchinal, & Mokrova, 2015). Due to geographic isolation, rural families have less access to social support networks and resources outside the family (Tine, 2017). In rural areas, families living in poverty face also higher infant mortality, lower quality housing, and limited access to healthcare than impoverished families in urban areas. Further, many industries, such as steel manufacturing, that provided stable employment opportunities in rural communities have largely left (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2015). The remaining jobs are mainly in service industries and offer low wages

along with nonstandard hours. The loss of stable, skilled jobs has contributed to higher child poverty rates in rural areas, where a substantial portion of students (41%) live in poverty (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2015). Finally, access to educational resources is more limited in rural contexts relative to urban and suburban settings. Educational attainment differs among settings, with 30% of urban adults obtaining a college degree compared to 17.5% of rural adults earning college degrees (USDA Economic Research Service, 2012).

The current study examines the preschool attendance of children living in rural communities in the Appalachian region, located in the southeastern United States. The mountainous region in the southeastern United States encompasses 13 states and consists of 25 million individuals (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012). The challenging terrain restricts the development of infrastructure and job growth. Geographic isolation coupled with limited public transportation, low parental educational attainment, and fewer skilled jobs suggest young children living in poverty experience a unique set of challenges. The children reflected in this study attended center-based preschool classrooms enrolling low-income families in Appalachia across three states.

We addressed four research aims. The first aim was to describe the extent to which children are absent in preschool classroom in Appalachia, and the second aim was to explore the child, family, and classroom factors that were associated with children's preschool attendance. Similar to studies of preschool attendance in urban settings, we expected to find variability in attendance based on child, family, and classroom characteristics. The third aim was to examine whether attendance was related to children's language and literacy development over the preschool year, whereas the fourth aim was to assess whether any observed relations between absenteeism and children's achievement was conditional on instructional quality. We focus on language and literacy skills, which are developing during the preschool years, and lay the foundation for future reading achievement and school success (Bierman et al., 2008). Language skills also facilitate children's classroom engagement by helping them regulate emotions, follow rules, and interact with peers and teachers. We hypothesized that children more frequently absent would exhibit less gain in language and literacy skill over the academic year, due to less exposure to learning opportunities provided in preschool, but also that increased absences would diminish the effects of high-quality classroom instruction on children's gains in these areas.

#### **Method**

The sample consisted of 451 children (53.4% female, 46.6% male) in center-based preschool programs (state-funded Pre-K or Head Start) with attendance information available. The sample included 100 classrooms and teachers. Data come from a larger literacy curriculum intervention study. Programs were invited to participate via a range of recruitment strategies and were not randomly selected from a larger set of programs. Teachers were randomly assigned to either an intervention or control condition. In the control condition, teachers implemented the curriculum of their choice. Teachers in the intervention group received training on the *Read It Again!* curriculum in a one-day 12-h workshop. Teachers were provided a manual consisting of 60 lesson plans and instructional supplies. Half of the intervention group teachers were also assigned to complete self-study videos on the curriculum (15 20-min videos on professional development). Classrooms that prioritized enrollment to low-income children where the majority of children were old enough to begin kindergarten in the following year were eligible to participate. After obtaining permission from program administrators, research staff conducted information sessions for interested teachers to enroll into the study. Recruited classrooms were located within rural areas of Appalachia counties in three states (Ohio, West Virginia, and Virginia). Five children from each classroom were randomly selected among consented children to participate in the study. Children were

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