Parental Insights on the Impact of Primary Project for Preschooler's Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Yadi Zhang, MS
Erinn Duprey, PhD
Joseph McFall, PhD
Lindsay Dryden, MS
Lynn Smith, LMSW
Shelley Sanyshyn, MS

May 2025

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Parent Perspectives on Primary Project for Preschool Children

Yadi Zhang, MS; Erinn Duprey, PhD; Joseph McFall, PhD; Lindsay Dryden, MS;
Lynn Smith, LMSW; Shelley Sanyshyn, MS

May 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Primary Project is a play-based intervention designed to support young children in adjusting to school environments, developing social-emotional skills, and fostering their well-being. Primary Project implementation is based on six foundational concepts. First, the focus of Primary Project is on supporting young children from pre-K through third grade. Second, universal screening is used to identify students who are appropriate for participating in Primary Project. Children with mild to moderate social and emotional needs are selected by school teams. Third, Primary Project provides direct student support. Specifically, short-term support is provided by a trained paraprofessional (the child associate) in a dedicated play space. Fourth, Primary Project follows a tiered model in which paraprofessionals (child associates) implement the intervention and are then supervised by a trained mental health professional. Child associates meet regularly with their mental health supervisor. Fifth, Primary Project implements ongoing program evaluation. Data and reports are used continuously to improve programming. Sixth and last, Primary Project is integrated into the school community. The program is an essential part of the school community and should receive input from multiple school stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, mental health professionals, and parents. All in all, Primary Project strives to detect and intervene in emerging difficulties to prevent more challenging emotional and behavioral problems from occurring.

Currently, Primary Project is implemented in 47 school districts across New York State as well as approximately 5 other states, benefiting thousands of children annually. Primary Project, which typically serves children ranging from kindergarten to 3rd grade, was adapted to serve prekindergarten children as well. The adapted pre-K version of Primary Project involves three different components including individual sessions with a child associate, play-pair sessions with a peer, and classroom push-in sessions.

In this report, we explored the perspectives of parents whose preschool children participated in Primary Project during the 2023-2024 school year. Children in two school districts in the Western New York region were involved in the program that was designed to enhance their social, emotional, and academic development.

Our goal for these interviews was to gather information on parents' perspectives of change in preschool children as a result of Primary Project participation. We were particularly interested in changes in domains that are not typically measured, such as school connectedness, as well as possible reasons for the change that occurred (i.e., mediators or mechanisms of change). These results were used to inform a larger randomized intervention study on the Primary Project Pre-K program that began in the Fall of 2024. Specifically, results were used to develop and shape the

measures used in the Primary Project Pre-K study, and also helped improve the way Primary Project staff and researchers communicate and collaborate with parents and caregivers.

Summary

Insights from parents demonstrate the positive impact of Primary Project on children's developmental trajectory. Initially, parents discussed various social and emotional challenges their children faced before participating in Primary Project. Parents' perspectives on Primary Project were overall positive, with observations of their children's improvements in social, emotional, and academic development. Parents believed that their children's significant changes could be attributed to the child-centered approach that prioritizes individual attention for children, the benefits of being paired with a peer during the *play-pair* component of the intervention, and effective communication between parents and child associate. Additionally, parents observed that children developed a sense of belonging to school, which in turn fostered a desire to attend school, and strengthened their relationships with peers and teachers. Lastly, parents offered suggestions for Primary Project and expressed the importance of being involved in the intervention. In conclusion, our results indicated that Primary Project created a safe and supportive environment in which children learned how to handle and express their feelings, build social skills, and grow in their sense of school connectedness.

METHOD

Participants

The interview process involved seven parents in total. Parents were recruited to participate in the interviews through outreach by the research team, which involved sending invitations to families whose children participated in the pre-K Primary Project program. Participation was voluntary, without any other predetermined inclusion criteria.

Of the seven participants, six were female and one was male. Demographic data was available for five out of seven interviewed parents. The racial/ethnic breakdown showed three White, one Black, and one Asian participant. The educational background of the participants varied, with two holding master's degrees, one holding a doctorate or professional degree, one having a high school diploma or equivalent, and two having some college experience but no degree.

Procedures

Informed consent was obtained after participants were provided with an overview of the study's purpose. Each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes and was conducted over the phone or via Zoom, depending on the participant's preference. A $40 gift card was offered as

compensation for participants' time and insight. There were several topics covered in the interview that invited parents to share their perspectives and observations of their child's experiences in the program, including:

1) **Initial Perceptions**: Parents were asked about their initial thoughts and feelings when their child first participated in the program.
2) **Social-Emotional Outcomes**: Questions explored changes in the child's social skills, emotional well-being, and interactions at home and school.
3) **Academic and Behavioral Outcomes**: Parents were asked to describe any observed impacts on their child's academic skills, classroom behavior, or learning.
4) **Unexpected Outcomes**: Parents were encouraged to share any unanticipated positive or negative changes they noticed.
5) **Mechanisms of Change**: Parents provided their perspectives on what aspects of Primary Project were most effective or impactful for their child, and what aspects of Primary Project they thought facilitated, or drove, the changes they saw in their child.
6) **Belongingness**: A specific focus was placed on understanding how parents observed their child's sense of belonging and connection to their preschool classroom and school.
7) **Suggestions for Improvement**: Parents were invited to share recommendations for enhancing the program to better meet the needs of children like theirs.

Analytic Plan

In this analysis, we used initial coding and axial coding to identify key themes, establish relationships between concepts, and develop a structured understanding of the data. According to Ellis et al. (1992), initial coding refers to how concepts are conceptualized by constantly comparing an incident with another incident, and a concept with another concept. This constant comparison process works as the foundation for researchers to group categories and identify themes.

Initial, open, line-by-line coding

Our initial step of data analysis consisted of open coding (Charmaz, 2014). As stated by Emerson et al. (2011), this process involves reading data line-by-line to identify, formulate, and raise ideas and themes that are varying and inconsistent. Specifically, we analyzed the data line-by-line to break data into different parts and compare its' similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2016).

Axial coding

After initial coding, we conducted axial coding, which is a process that creates categories and subcategories and determines how they relate (Charmaz, 2014). It guides researchers towards thinking about when, how, why, and the conditions of something happening, and is suitable for a

wide range of data (Saldaña, 2016). The goal of axial coding is to "reassemble data that were split or fractured during the initial coding process" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124) and develop a coherent synthesis of the data corpus (Saldaña, 2016). This coding process involves linking different categories in relation to other categories and subcategories, finding repeated words among codes, summing the theme through inductive and deductive analysis, and then generating axial codes by comparing grouping pattern meanings.

RESULTS

Overall, our analysis revealed seven key themes related to parents' perceptions of Primary Project in pre-K, which include topics on *Child's Social and Emotional Challenges*, *Optimistic Initial Thoughts of Participating in Primary Project*, *Social and Emotional Development*, *Academic Development, Belonging to School, Reasons Contributing to Changes*, and *Parents' Suggestions*. Further details and participant quotes are below.
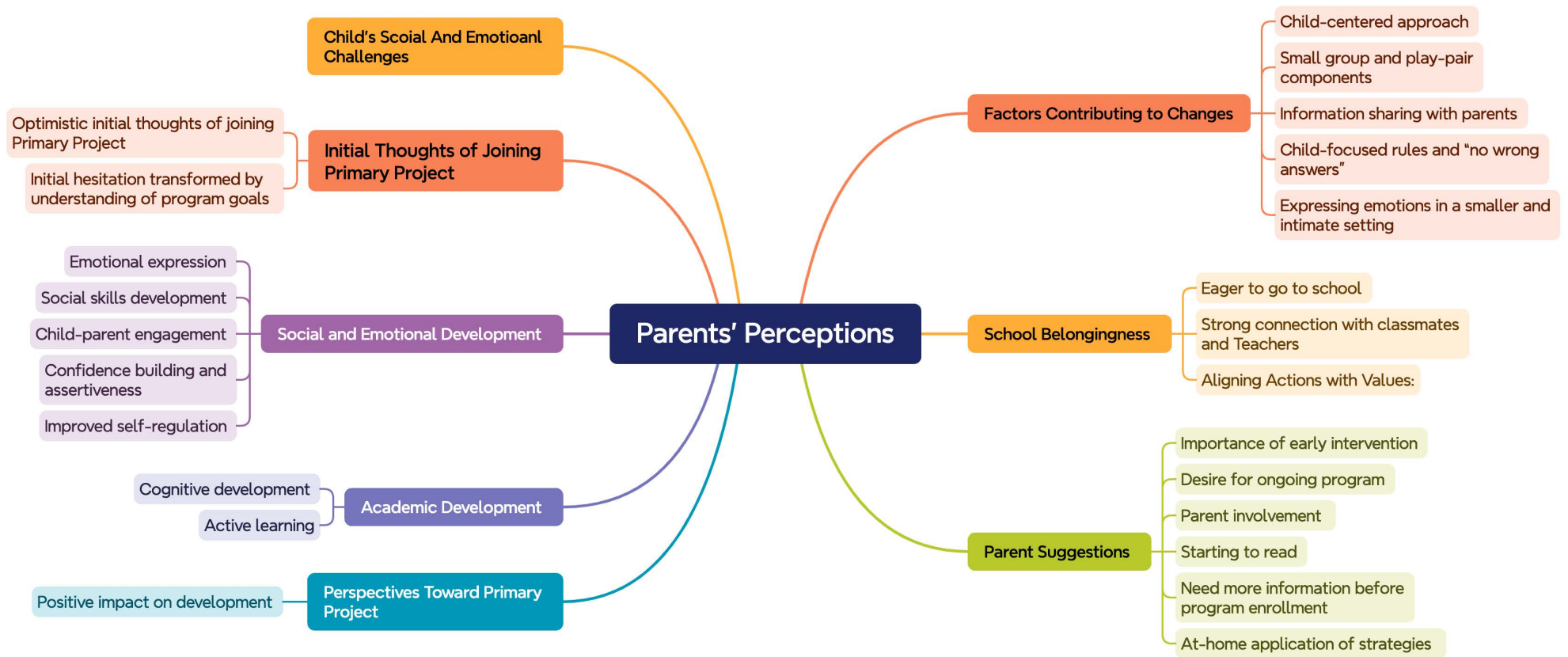
Figure 1. Parents' perceptions of Primary Project.

Child's Social and Emotional Challenges

When asked about their initial thoughts about Primary Project, parents often described children's emotional and social difficulties prior to Primary Project. According to parents, many of their children lacked social skills, had trouble expressing themselves, and were reluctant to communicate with others. Additionally, some parents indicated that their children had difficulties with separation anxiety. Parents also discussed strong emotional reactions and difficulty with routines, including mealtimes. Quotes from participants included:

> *"My daughter used to be really shy [she] would bite her nails. Like she wouldn't even speak in public." (Parent 4)*

> *"And the negative kind of girls crying, that's only I noticed…. the negative things, just crying. Sometimes if she don't get what she wanted, she cried." (Parent 5)*

> *"One of the things emotionally with him, we feel is kind of overreacts to certain situations." (Parent 7)*

> *"Eating has always been a struggle [of] his. He's very particular on what he wants to eat." (Parent 6)*

Initial Thoughts of Joining Primary Project

Overall, parents communicated their excitement and optimism about their children participating in this program. Two sub-categories emerged within this theme, including optimistic initial thoughts about joining Primary Project, and initial hesitation that was transformed by understanding of program goals.

Optimistic initial thoughts of joining Primary Project
The parents had positive expectations and enthusiastic reactions when their child had chances to participate in the Primary Project. Quotes from participants included:

> *"I was excited about her joining that project just because she needs the more socialization and interactions with kids her own age." (Parent 3)*

Initial hesitation transformed by understanding of program goals
Some parents had initial concerns about the child's participation in Primary Project, later eased by explanation from the school about the program's focus on social skills. Quotes from participants included:

> *"I was just a little concerned that he was even brought up for it. When they explained it to me and who they pick for kids to participate in the project, I felt a little bit better because social skills is something that we've been trying to work on with him" (Parent 7)*

Social and Emotional Development

Parents described changes in their children's social and emotional development as a result of Primary Project. Parents noted significant improvements in their child's ability to express their feelings, engage with peers, share their experiences with parents, assert themselves in social interactions, and manage their emotions effectively. Overall, parents felt that their child's growth in social and emotional competencies through this program helped them to communicate better and enhanced their academic success. There were five sub-categories in this theme: emotional expression, social skills development, child-parent engagement, confidence building and assertiveness, and improved self-regulation.

Emotional expression
Parents reported their child showed increased ease in expressing themselves and greater comfort in communication. Quotes from participants included:

> *"She's definitely not afraid to tell us how she's feeling and what she's thinking." (Parent 1)*

> *"She can … express what she wants to do, how she wants to play something. If somebody makes her feel, a certain way, she is able to express that now. She feels more comfortable doing that than she did before." (Parent 3)*

Social skills development
Findings showed that parents perceived noticeable changes in children's attempts to play with others, foster social interactions, and build relationships with peers after participating in Primary Project. Quotes from participants included:

> *"I took her to [a] birthday party with her classmates a week ago, and to see her running around with these kids that she really doesn't know outside of the classroom, just interact with them." (Parent 2)*

> *"Social, I guess at school every morning when her classmates say hi too, she say(s) hi." (Parent 5)*

Child-parent engagement
Parents observed that children in Primary Project were more willing to talk about their daily activities and experiences with them. Quotes from participants included:

> *"And she … just tells you about her whole entire day. So, you know, from what she had from lunch and how it's just nonstop." (Parent 1)*

Confidence building and assertiveness

Parents shared that their children gained confidence, asserted themselves, overcame shyness, and became more outgoing through participation in Primary Project. Quotes from participants included:

> *"And when she came back, another male student like took her spot and she went out like looked at the teacher but didn't ask for the teachers help and just said, "hey, you took my spot" to this kid."* (Parent 2)

> *"I don't know what she did, but my daughter used to be like really shy would bite her nails. Like she wouldn't even speak in public. But then after when Primary Project started like a few weeks into it and I would say like maybe towards half of it. She was like a completely different person, like she would absolutely speak up and she stopped biting her nails."* (Parent 4)

> *"Stating how he feels or getting the choice of what he wants to do that day... initiating play with peers, just more confident in being himself, not so reserved."* (Parent 7)

Improved self-regulation

Through participation in Primary Project, parents noted that their child improved his or her ability to handle emotions and communicate effectively. Quotes from participants included:

> *"And that actually happened a couple of times that she instead of getting upset about it, she calmly expressed how she felt about it."* (Parent 3)

> *"Now she's eating, she's listening. Now she sits down properly. Sometimes kind of silly because she's eating candy or sugar, but she's so quiet right now."* (Parent 5)

> *"Not completely freaking out if she (his baby sister) grabs one of his toys."* (Parent 6)

Academic Development

While academic development is not necessarily a primary goal of Primary Project, parents noticed some changes in learning outcomes and cognitive development. Parents noticed that children involved in Primary Project demonstrated enthusiasm and engagement in their learning, as well as enhanced comprehension of following instructions. Through their cognitive development and active learning, children were able to develop comprehensive skills necessary for their academic growth.

Cognitive development

Parents recognized that there was improvement in their child's ability to follow instructions and their learning progress. Quotes from participants included:

"And she's picking that up and she knows how to count them, little higher than like I said, I wanna say like 25." (Parent 1)

"She was struggling with following directions even in the beginning. So, I'm not too sure how it is in the classroom. But when I was there that one day, I noticed that she does follow directions very well with her teachers and everything." (Parent 3)

"He was able to focus, like, on accomplishing a task." (Parent 6)

"With remembering information and being able to retell it, I've seen a huge improvement." (Parent 7)

Active learning

As a result of Primary Project, parents noted how their children became more engaged and enthusiastic about learning. Quotes from participants included:

"I think she's becoming …[a] more active participant in her learning." (Parent 2)

"Her teachers have always described her as being a bright student like she's like I think she's doing better, absolutely like she's more interested in drawing, writing, coloring." (Parent 4)

"We have gotten positive feedback from his teacher as well. You know, the last thing she had said is, you know, he's been more of a leader to his classmates, like setting the example and stuff." (Parent 6)

Perspectives Toward Primary Project

Parental attitudes toward the Primary Project were overwhelmingly positive. Their satisfaction stemmed from observation of how Primary Project has enhanced their child's academic, social, and emotional development.

Positive impact on development

Parents expressed satisfaction, praised the program's effectiveness and recognized how Primary Project has positively influenced their child's development and growth. Quotes from participants included:

"And you know, I think like just do play and whatever you guys are doing, she's thriving so much." (Parent 1)

"I think this project was really great for her overall with her academic aims, her speech, even everything, it just was a great fit for her." (Parent 3)

"I would say we've definitely seen improvement in him for sure." (Parent 6)

"I was happy with the program and the teacher and I saw all of the growth and the communication was great and clear." (Parent 7)

Factors Contributing to Changes

There were several factors that parents considered as reasons, or mechanisms, for changes observed in their child through the program. These included an individualized child-centered approach, small group learning routines, and regular communication with parents for ensuring that children felt empowered.

Child-centered approach
Parents addressed that the one-to-one interaction facilitates communication between professionals and their children, empowering them to lead and share their opinions. Quotes from participants included:

"So, I feel like it's just giving her the more opportunity to kind of lead the way..." (Parent 2)

"The one-on-one experience like having a skilled person who understands children, the behaviors of children and understands the cues and how to guide them." (Parent 4)

Small group and play-pair components
Parents believed that peer modeling and small group learning routine shaped children's desired behaviors. Quotes from participants included:

"The small group setting and being a routine of meeting in that group setting for her is what really helped. You always tell me, I'm gonna go see [Child associate]. She really looked forward to that structure ..." (Parent 3)

"One on one with the skilled professional and also bringing in the other child, I think those two things played a huge role. They would actually bring in another child as like a role model or something like if they have behaviors, they want my child to learn." (Parent 4)

Information sharing with parents
By providing updates and information about the children's activities, parents appreciated how child associates maintained a strong and communicative relationship with them. Quotes from participants included:

"Like she would always call me and say, I just want to give you feedback like if you have any questions, if you feel like there's other things I could do with your child. So, she was always very communicative." (Parent 4)

"She called me and she update me everything that [Child name] do at primary [Project]." (Parent 5)

"His [child associate] that was doing it with him would send updates every day that she worked with him on what they did and what he said he wanted to do next time." (Parent 7)

Child-focused rules and "no wrong answers"
Parents emphasized that the program's rule of 'no wrong answers' was one beneficial for the child. Quotes from participants included:

"Tell people what you're thinking, you know it's not going to be wrong, and you don't need to worry about it." (Parent 7)

Expressing emotions in a smaller and intimate setting
Parents highlighted how the small group settings in this program allowed their child to practice regulating emotions without the pressure or anxiety often experienced in larger group settings. Quotes from participants included:

"It was good for him to practice, like, fading his emotions in a smaller setting, because when he's in a big setting, he gets kind of nervous." (Parent 7)

School Belongingness
According to parents, their children have formed a sense of belonging in the school. These children were enthusiastic about attending school and showed strong connections with classmates and teachers. Children's belongingness of school were fundamental for developing social skills and fostering emotional resilience.

Eager to go to school
Parents observed their children's enthusiasm to go to school. Quotes from participants included:

"But the fact that she's always excited to go to school, like even the night before she's always asking, am I gonna go to school tomorrow?" (Parent 4)

"But I noticed [child name], he's confident. He wants to go to school. Even he's tired. He go to school." (Parent 5)

"School wasn't really like an interest, but then, like, he started wanting to go and getting excited about it." (Parent 7)

Strong connection with classmates and Teachers

The parents described their children's strong emotional connections with their classmates and teachers, who were eager to meet them and consider them as friends. Quotes from participants included:

"I can tell you what I do see [Child name] loves to go to school. She feels as if ... every single classmate she has and teachers ... those are her friends, her best friends, and she just loves her teachers and peers." (Parent 3)

"So I think the willingness to go to school and always talking about her friends at school, like I know all the names of her classmates because that's all she keeps talking about. And she also mentions her teachers. I guess the willingness and the fact that she would make up all the stories or cite things based on in connection to her classmates or her teachers, I guess that's how I can judge that." (Parent 4)

Extending the classroom to the home

Parents noted their child's excitement in involving their family in their learning journey. Quotes from participants included:

"He brings his work home and stuff. Like he's excited to show us, like, whatever he colored." (Parent 6)

Parent Suggestions

Parents made several suggestions based on their experiences with Primary Project. First, they suggested that children should be able to participate in Primary Project at an earlier age and expressed a strong desire for an ongoing program. Furthermore, parents were keen to become actively involved in their child's intervention, suggested to be provided with more information about the program before enrollment, and acquire strategies that they can apply at home.

Importance of early intervention

Parents emphasized that participating in the program at a young age was crucial for children's development. Quotes from participants included:

"It was better for [Child name] to figure it out now to be part of this now at her young age rather than later on." (Parent 2)

Desire for ongoing program

Parents expressed their desire to continue the program in the future. Quotes from participants included:

"We are especially eager to know if the program can continue in the future." (Parent 2)

"The only thing I would say is I wish it went on longer, I wish, because I know it's it only runs for 8 weeks, so I actually wish it was like the whole school year." (Parent 4)

"The other thing too, is like if Primary Project people could like, the professionals could maybe check back in with the kids every so often." (Parent 4)

Parent involvement

Parents asserted that it was important for them to get involved in Primary Project. They wanted to maintain ongoing communication with professionals, understand how their children interact in a group setting, and assess their behavior during intervention. Quotes from participants included:

"The parents can evaluate like them in that group setting. maybe like have the parents come in for a session with them, that would be kind of cool." (Parent 3)

Starting to read

Parents expected their children to begin reading in Primary Project. This may reflect a misunderstanding of the aims of Primary Project. Quotes from participants included:

"Because I think I want to start my daughter ... to read." (Parent 5)

Need more information before program enrollment

Parents underscored the importance of providing detailed information about the program's goals, structure, and expected outcomes before starting the intervention. Quotes from participants included:

"Like, when we signed them up for the program or agreed to do it, like, we didn't really know a lot about, like, what the program was or what it's, you know, what it's targeting. I feel like we could have more in depth, like what to expect or like what they're working on." (Parent 6)

At-home application of strategies

Parents were interested in learning strategies and tools they could apply at home to reinforce and extend the program's impact. Quotes from participants included:

"Just things that I could reinforce at home to try to work on him even more...We could try to help just to, you know, get him going down the right path." (Parent 6)

CONCLUSION

Results from the parent interviews indicated that Primary Project had a significant impact on children's developmental trajectories, particularly in fostering social and emotional skills. Parents emphasized the importance of early intervention, noting that taking part at a young age allows them to more effectively address children's developmental needs. According to parents, there was a noticeable improvement in students' ability to express emotions, form relationships with their peers, and engage confidently in academic and social settings. A further benefit of the program was that it strengthened the relationship between family and school, with children enthusiastically sharing their school experiences at home.

There were a few suggestions given by parents that may further strengthen the Primary Project intervention. Many parents suggested extending the program's duration to maximize its benefits. Further empirical research is needed to understand the impact of dosage (i.e., number of sessions) on children's outcomes. Additionally, parents advocated for clearer communication about the program's goals and activities before enrollment, as well as practical strategies they could implement at home to support the program's objectives.

The results from this pilot study will inform the design and implementation of future Primary Project research. More specifically, these results have been used to guide the methodology in a randomized trial of Primary Project at the pre-k level. For instance, results about the importance of school belonging led our researchers to include subsequent measures to capture quantitative change in school belongingness over time as a result of Primary Project. In subsequent studies, this feedback may be used to inform and refine methodologies. In particular, these additional measures assist us in identifying other strategies that may need to be incorporated and emphasize the importance of strengthening parental connections. Overall, the present pilot study underlines the importance of parental involvement in shaping Primary Project and other pre-K interventions and research. Through parents' insights, we gain a deeper understanding of the needs and contexts of pre-K children, ultimately enabling us to provide better support to these children.

As a whole, Primary Project provides a strong foundation for young children to develop the necessary skills for successful academic and social growth. Our results demonstrate that the program also helps to create a sense of belonging and connection between pre-K children and the school community.

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