

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
SOCIAL LINKS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:
A PATH ANALYSIS**



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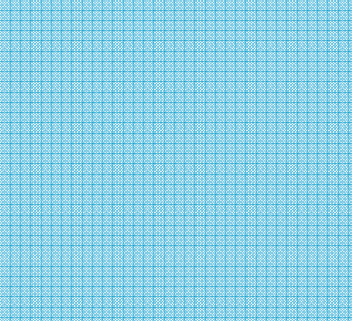


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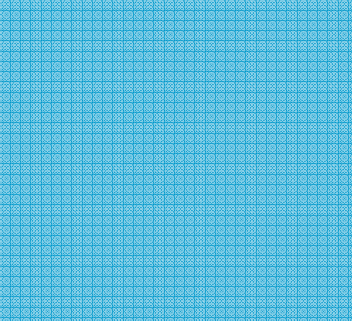
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract



The purpose of this study was to add supportive empirical evidence to the discussion about the mediating role of attentiveness/conformity with program routines between socialization and young children's language and cognitive development. This correlational study was performed on a sample of 114 four-year-old children enrolled in a preschool program. Regression analysis confirmed the hypothesized positive, medium-sized association between socialization and language-cognitive skill acquisition. Path analysis confirmed the hypothesis that attentiveness/conformity to program routines mediates in part the socialization effect. No significant gender effect was hypothesized or found. The findings are discussed in the context of the potential threat to socialization posed by stringent cognitive curriculum for preschool. Our results suggest that emphasis on socialization at the four-year old level is appropriate and foundational for program adaptation and cognitive/language development.

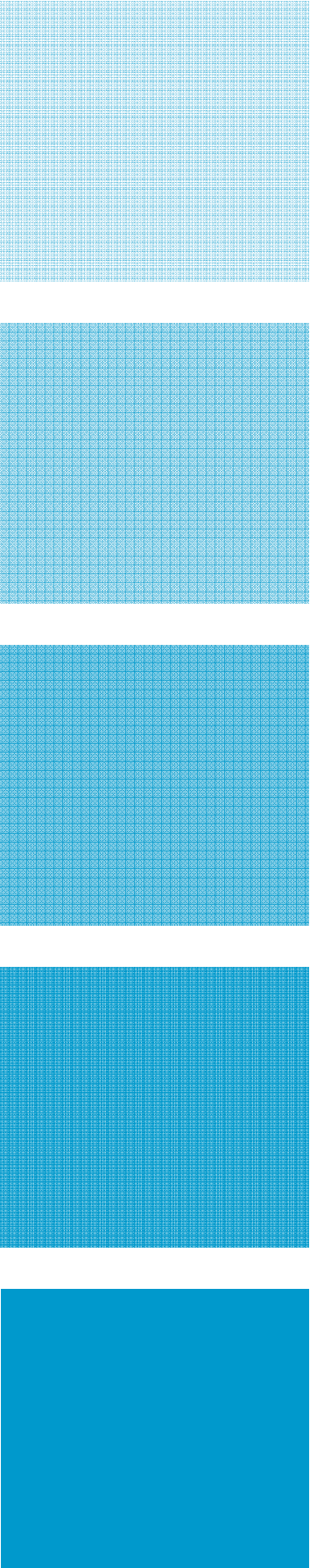
Social Links in Early Childhood Education: A Path Analysis



Ask early childhood teachers what some of their daily headaches are, and frequently their charges' inappropriate classroom behavior, difficulty in handling anger and frustration in an acceptable manner, and in getting along with peers, are likely to come to the top of the list. For both the teachers and parents alike, the young child's school readiness and consequent academic success are of primary concern. Perhaps less readily recognized is the fact that in order to succeed in school, every child needs to achieve a certain level of emotional maturity and social competence. It is not intuitively obvious to many parents and early childhood educators, who place primary importance on cognitive development and the acquisition of pre-academic skills, that to an angry or frightened child, writing letters and learning number concepts is not what s/he can or wants to do. In fact, it is far less important for a preschool or kindergarten child if s/he can recite the alphabet, write her name, or count how many crayons there are in a box, than to feel good about themselves, be able to get along with peers, and to accept the classroom rules and routines. These are actually some necessary prerequisites that enable the child to learn constructively, develop new skills, and acquire knowledge (e.g., Boyer, 1991; Coie, Rabiner, & Lochman, 1989; Gresham, 1995; Kagan & Zigler, 1987; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1990; Ramey & Ramey, 1992; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1986; Zigler & Stevenson, 1993).



Young children need to develop basic interpersonal

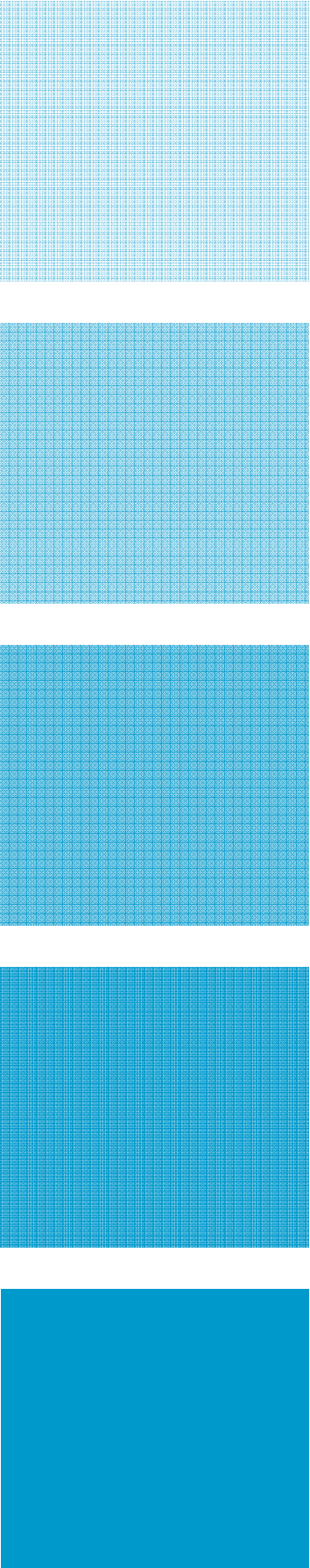


communication

and coping skills, since their early formative years establish the foundation for life-long learning, social adjustment, and a better chance for succeeding in school. We have to recognize that young children need to develop emotional and social skills, and that that skill development can be facilitated and cultivated. While few would question the role of social-emotional skills in the child's balanced development, the phrases like 'emotional literacy', 'emotional intelligence', 'emotional control', 'the 4th R of basic education' (Relationships), 'personal intelligence', 'people intelligence', and the idea that they can be raised have been recently gaining in recognition and popularity (Elias & Tobias, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1995; McClellan & Katz, 1993).

Research in developmental psychology provides evidence supporting the existence of interdependence among all of the child's developmental domains (e.g., cognitive, language, social-emotional, etc.), and its role in the child's growth. Understanding of this interdependent developmental progression; its relation to the child's chronological age; and its expression in the child's comprehension, verbalizations, emotions and actions; have significant implication in early childhood education (e.g.: Bredekamp, 1997; Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995; Mussen, 1983; Zigler & Stevenson, 1993). These principles underlie the early childhood education curricula, and the statements on what constitutes the core and the developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education (e.g., Bredekamp, 1997; Bredekamp & Rosengrant, 1995; The New York State Early Childhood Career Development Initiative, 1997; Peterson & Felton-Collins, 1986; Saracho & Spodek, 1983).

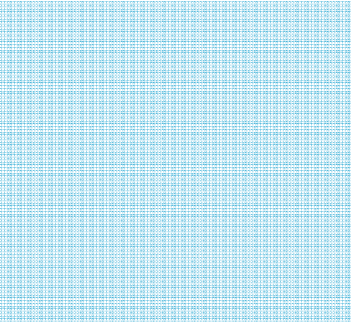
Discussion regarding the interdependence across developmental domains is particularly relevant in view of the growing trend of extending formal education into the preschool age and the need to enunciate the importance of the broad developmental understanding of young children's educational abilities and needs (e.g. Georgia Prekindergarten Program, 1996; New York Universal Prekindergarten Program, 1997). School curricula traditionally have placed a strong emphasis on academic skills. As the discussion grows around national goals of education and the curriculum standards are being redefined, we begin to integrate in them the rationale and ways to develop skills such as interpersonal skills, social competence and other 'real life' competencies, both as a separate part of the curriculum as well as skills that need to 'cut across' academic disciplines (Bredekamp, 1997; National Education Goals Panel, 1997).



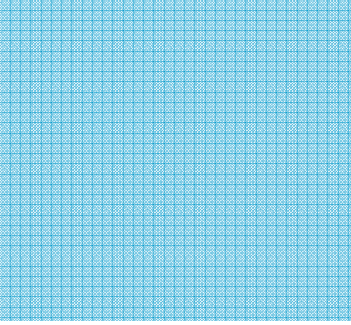
From the preventive intervention perspective, promoting the young child's emotional wellness and social competence are at the center of discussion on assuring '...the learning and personal development of children...' (Cowen et al., p. IX). We commonly agree that school success is a vital path to life success. The benefits of assuring young children's balanced personal development and a successful start in school are many and far-reaching. Research supports the notion that children who feel good about themselves, are being liked by peers, and make friends, develop better attitude toward school and make better gains in school performance (Cowen et al., 1996; Elias & Tobias, 1996; Schweinhart et al., 1993). Conversely, evidence exists that children with poor peer relations, lonely or aggressive, are at risk for school adjustment difficulties and may be actually prevented from becoming well adjusted to school and successfully meet the progressively increasing academic and social tasks (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995; Ladd, 1990, Ladd and Price, 1987). In other words, early adjustment difficulties can grow into serious educational and life problems. As McClellan and Katz (1993) succinctly phrase it, 'during the last two decades a convincing body of evidence has accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about the age of six, they have a high probability of being at risk throughout life. Indeed, the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, school grades, or classroom behavior, but the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. The risks are many: poor mental health, dropping out of school, low achievement, and other school difficulties, poor employment history, etc. Relationships should be counted as the first of the four R's of education' (p.1).

Review of the literature specifically indicates that poor peer relations may contribute to young children's learning difficulties and poor academic achievement, increase risks for juvenile delinquency and conduct disorders, and eventually may be associated with social and emotional difficulties in adulthood (Ferguson-Horwood, 1995; Parker and Asher, 1987; Zigler, Taussig, Black, 1992; Yoshikawa, 1994).

In sum, it is important to recognize that emotional development and basic social competence play crucial role in enabling young children acquire age-appropriate skills and competencies. The notion of educating 'the whole child' is not new, but it needs to be repeatedly brought to the forefront of the attention of all who deal with young children. As Goleman (1994) points out, emotions need to be put 'at the center of aptitudes for living', since 'the emotional lessons we learn as children at home and at school shape the emotional circuits, making us more adept - or inept - at the basics



of emotional intelligence. This means that childhood and adolescence are critical windows of opportunity for setting down the emotional habits that will govern our lives.' (p. XIII). In recent years numerous programs have been developed in support of this view and with the intent to provide the tools and resources for the early childhood educators and parents to facilitate young children's socio-emotional growth and social competence (e.g. Committee for Children, 1988; Kusche & Greenberg, 1994; Marshall, et al., 1996; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1990; Shure, 1992).



The *main purpose* of the present study was to add supportive empirical evidence to the growing body of data and discussion about the mediating role of socialization in young children's skill development, and to test a hypothesis about the pathways through which it is accomplished. Our data contained information on cognitive, language, and social development, as well as a measure of children's attentiveness and conformity to program routines. We hypothesized that 1) socialization would have a positive effect on the acquisition of language and cognitive development, controlling for the child's age and sex, and 7) that attentiveness and conformity to program routines mediate in part the socialization effect.

Note: Reference T00-602

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