



Society for Research in Child Development

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Pre-K Students Benefit When Teachers Are Supportive; Class Size and Teacher Qualifications not Directly Associated with Learning and Social Development

Study findings are important for federal and state investments in early education

States are investing considerable amounts of money in pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds. A new study finds that the quality of interactions between teachers and children plays a key role in accounting for gains in children's development when compared to typical quality indicators such as teachers' education, class size, and child-to-teacher ratio.

The study suggests that efforts to promote interactions with teachers that are instructionally and emotionally supportive can help children gain the most benefit from their pre-K experience and be more ready for school. It appears in the May/June 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

"These results provide compelling evidence that young children's learning in pre-K occurs in large part through high-quality emotional and instructional interactions with teachers," according to Andrew J. Mashburn, senior research scientist at the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia and the lead author of the study. "This helps parents, teachers, and program administrators understand the specific features of pre-K programs that directly support children's academic, language and social development," Mashburn said.

"These results also have important implications for state policy-makers who are deciding how to design and regulate pre-K programs in ways that truly benefit children. Efforts that focus on the quality of instructional and emotional interactions within pre-K classrooms appear to have the potential to improve children's development, more so than the traditional approaches of class size, teacher qualifications and student-teacher ratios" "Given that other studies have found the quality of instructional and emotional interactions in pre-K classrooms to be average at best, these results point to the importance of working to improve teacher-child classroom interactions."

Researchers from the University of California at Los Angeles and the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also collaborated on the study.

The researchers looked at 2,439 4-year-olds enrolled in 671 pre-kindergarten classrooms in 11 states in the United States. They tested children's academic, language, and social skills at the beginning and end of the program. In addition, teachers and program administrators provided

information about whether programs met nine minimum standards of quality recommended by professional organizations, including teacher-child ratio and teacher certification. And observers rated the quality of the overall classroom environment and of instructional and emotional interactions between teachers and children.

Using this information, the researchers assessed how strongly each of the three ways to measure quality—based on the minimum standards, the quality of the overall classroom environment, and the quality of emotional and instructional interactions—was associated with children’s development.

The researchers found that minimum standards, such as teachers’ level of education and field of study, class size, and child-to-teacher ratio, were not directly associated with children’s academic, language, and social development. Rather, children developed greater academic and language skills in classrooms when they had higher quality instructional interactions, and they developed greater social skills when they had higher quality emotional interactions. High-quality instructional interactions happened when teachers provided children with feedback on their ideas, commented in ways that extended and expanded their skills, and frequently used discussions and activities to promote complex thinking. High-quality emotional interactions happened when teachers frequently displayed positive emotions and were sensitive to children’s needs, interests, motivations, and points of view.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 3, *Measures of Classroom Quality in Pre-Kindergarten and Children’s Development of Academic, Language and Social Skills*, by Mashburn, AJ, Pianta, RC, Hamre, BK, and Downer, JT (University of Virginia), Barbarin, OA, Bryant, D, Burchinal, M, and Early, DM (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and Howes, C (University of California at Los Angeles). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.