

Factors that Support Language and Literacy Resilience of Children in Head Start

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This study examined the links between academic resilience in language and literacy and potential qualities of the child and the classroom environment that may protect preschoolers from the negative consequences of risk in the year before they enter formal schooling.

Exposure to poverty is associated with multiple negative outcomes for young children, including lower academic achievement, which eventually presents as higher rates of grade repetition, more placements in special education, increased high school dropout rates, and fewer years of schooling overall.

While the link between risk and poor developmental outcomes is strong, many at-risk children demonstrate resilience and continue to thrive despite exposure to adversity. Resilience is a process through which individuals achieve positive outcomes despite adversity. One of the principal goals of research with at-risk children is to identify factors that promote resilience, with the ultimate goal of increasing support in these areas.

The Study

This study examined two factors found in previous research to be related to resilience: teacher-reported psychosocial strengths (including children's initiative, self-control, and attachment), as measured by the Protective Factors scale of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), and classroom quality, as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS).

The researchers used preschoolers' early language and literacy as an indicator of resilience, as measured by the Language and Literacy Scale of the Galileo System for the Electronic Management of Learning. Language and literacy has been associated with positive outcomes later on in schooling and is one of the most highly emphasized school readiness domains in Head Start, a national program serving children from low income families.

Children from low-income homes tend to be at high risk for language difficulties, possibly due to a home environment with less-rich language experiences. Children from low-income homes also tend to have lower scores on IQ measures at age 3, as well as lower trajectories of language and reading achievement across elementary school, in comparison to their higher income peers. Acquiring better language skills in preschool may help improve later language and literacy outcomes and promote positive development in other areas such as math, social skills, and problem behaviors.

Researchers studied whether high classroom quality matters equally for all children or is more important for children with lower levels of psychosocial strengths. Participants in the study included 275 preschool children drawn from 29 classrooms within five centers in a large, urban Head Start program in south Florida.

Findings

Children who were rated by their teachers as having more initiative, more self-control, and closer attachment were also rated by their teachers as having higher language and literacy scores at the beginning of the school year.

The findings may imply that processes at work before age four are important to school readiness at the end of Head Start. A focus on boosting child psychosocial strengths as early as possible or individualizing classroom experiences to compensate for low psychosocial factors may be critical.

Child psychosocial strengths, however, were not related to preschoolers' rates of growth in language and literacy across the preschool year. Preschoolers in

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System™

The CLASS™ is an observational instrument developed at the University of Virginia to assess classroom quality in PK-12 classrooms. It describes multiple dimensions of teaching that are linked by research to students' positive social and academic and development and has been validated in over 2,000 classrooms.

For more information, see <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/labs/class>

The CLASS was developed at the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning and has been licensed to Teachstone LLC, a Charlottesville-based company founded by Robert C. Pianta and Bridget Hamre.

The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment

The DECA is a nationally normed assessment of within-child protective factors in preschool children aged two to five. The Protective Factors scale is comprised of 27 items assessing the frequency of positive behaviors ("never" to "very frequently") in three areas linked to resilience: Initiative, Self-Control, and Attachment.

The DECA was developed by the Devereux Early Childhood Initiative (<http://www.devereux.org>)

this sample, on average, increased their language and literacy skills across the year, but it was not the case that children with more psychosocial strengths grew faster (or gained more) across the year.

The three components of classroom quality measured by the CLASS include emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. This study found that classroom organization significantly predicted growth in language and literacy over the course of the school year. An organized classroom has an environment that prevents behavior problems, provides stimulating and varied materials, and maximizes the use of classroom time. This support, in turn, may provide children with the opportunities they need to engage in meaningful learning experiences. Having a well-organized classroom environment with a broad array of

enriching and engaging activities may be particularly important for promoting early achievement gains.

Older children in the study were rated by their teachers as having higher language and literacy skills at the beginning of the year, in comparison to younger children. Age did not predict language and literacy growth across the year. On average, children increased their language and literacy skills across the year regardless of their age.

Instructional support was not predictive of language and literacy in this study, likely due to the fact that instructional support tended to be low across all classrooms. The CLASS observational measure sets a high standard for instructional quality, defining it in terms of promoting higher-order thinking, encouraging language use, and giving in-depth and informative feedback to children. Prior studies have found instructional quality to be consistently low across a wide range of preschools.

Conclusion

The researchers examined the associations between characteristics of the child and of the classroom context and children's growth in language and literacy skills. In particular, they looked to see whether high classroom quality mattered equally for all children, or if high classroom quality was more important for particular groups of children, such as those with lower levels of psychosocial strengths.

They found that both child and classroom characteristics examined in this study were important and both contributed to children's language and literacy skills—and that classroom quality mattered equally for all children, not just those with lower levels of psychosocial strengths.

A child who is attentive, motivated, and independent may benefit more from an organized and supportive classroom environment than a child who is inattentive or passive; further research in this area is needed. The current findings emphasize that multiple influences at both the child and classroom level contribute to children's school readiness.

A full report of this study was published as follows: Maier, M. F., Vitiello, V. E., & Greenfield, D. B. (2012).

A multilevel model of child- and classroom-level psychosocial factors that support language and literacy resilience of children in Head Start. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27, 104-114.