

A Day in Preschool: Variation in Children’s Classroom Engagement

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This study examined sources of variability in preschool children’s positive and negative engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks, and how that variability was related to both classroom activity settings and children’s age and gender.

Researchers have found strong evidence that young children’s engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks significantly predict their academic and social success. Preschool classrooms give children regular opportunities to interact with adults and other children and to engage in activities that foster learning. A child’s ability to get the most out of his or her classroom experiences by engaging actively and positively with teachers, peers, and tasks and limiting negative or conflictual engagement may maximize that child’s opportunities to learn and develop within the classroom.

Children may not engage in high-quality experiences evenly across the preschool day, however, and changing aspects of the classroom environment, such as shifts from whole group instruction to free play, may influence a child’s behavior. Children may engage differently across activity settings, such as small-group instruction, clean-up time, and outdoor play time.

Researchers at the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning conducted a study to better understand the variability of children’s classroom engagement within a single day and shed some light on the sources of that variability.

The Study

A socioeconomically and linguistically diverse group of 283 preschool children drawn from 84

classrooms was observed and rated using a child-focused observational system—the Individualized Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or inCLASS—that allowed researchers to observe child behaviors in multiple, 10-minute periods across a single school day. Children ranged in age from 34–63 months old. The classrooms were located in a large urban region in the southwestern United States and included morning and afternoon classes. The group under study was ethnically diverse and included 62% Hispanic children.

Activity Settings

The term *activity setting* refers to the basic way that teachers organize class time in terms of both group size and activity.

Common activity settings in preschool include large group, small group, individual work time, free choice, outdoor time, meals, and transitions between activities.

These activity settings may differ in the opportunities they provide for children to engage positively (or negatively) with teachers, peers, and tasks.

The Individualized Classroom Assessment Scoring System

The inCLASS is a child-focused observational assessment of children's positive and negative engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks in preschool. The inCLASS is comprised of ten dimensions:

- Positive engagement with the teacher
- Teacher communication
- Peer sociability
- Peer assertiveness
- Peer communication
- Engagement with tasks
- Self-reliance
- Conflict with the teacher
- Conflict with peers
- Behavior control

Each target child is rated on all ten dimensions after each 10-minute observation period.

Each dimension is rated on a 7-point scale guided by detailed descriptors of low, medium, and high behaviors, with higher ratings indicating more positive engagement (except in the cases of Conflict with Teachers and Conflict with Peers, for which higher ratings indicate more negative engagement).

Ratings incorporate both the quality and the frequency of observed behaviors.

Findings

Results suggested that children's engagement varied significantly across the preschool day. The inCLASS instrument revealed that children showed more positive engagement with peers and tasks during free choice and outdoor time (where they had opportunities for greater autonomy) compared to teacher-structured activities. However, children's engagement with teachers was more positive during teacher-structured activities. Children showed less positive engagement with teachers in each of these more autonomous settings.

Transition times between activities—including hand washing, clean-up, and lining up to walk to

a new location—emerged as difficult parts of the day, associated with less positive engagement with teachers and tasks.

Children's positive engagement with teachers and tasks decreased slightly across the day, regardless of activity setting. It may be that child fatigue, changes in teacher behaviors, or changes in classroom quality resulted in less positive engagement over time.

Children whose families reported speaking English at home had significantly higher engagement with tasks compared to children whose families reported speaking no English at home. This suggests that children from language-minority homes may face a substantial barrier to full engagement in classroom activities.

Across activity settings, older children were rated higher than younger children on peer and task engagement, in keeping with older children's more developed social and self-regulatory skills.

Boys did not exhibit higher conflict or lower task engagement across settings, contrary to the researchers' expectations. It may be that prior studies have found gender differences, in part, because they relied on teacher reports. Teachers may perceive differences between boys and girls that are not apparent to outside observers.

Likewise, rating instruments that depend on global assessments of children's behavior and are less sensitive to variations may lead educators to miss important information about when and where children are most and least engaged.

Conclusion

These findings, together with previous research, suggest that both characteristics of the classroom setting and child factors are associated with children's classroom engagement throughout a day in preschool. Ultimately, findings such as these may provide guidance for restructuring the preschool day to maximize children's opportunities to learn.

A full description of this study is published as Vitiello, V.E., Booren, L.M., Downer, J.T., & Williford, A. (2012). Variation in children's classroom engagement throughout a day in preschool: Relations to classroom and child factors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27, 210-220.

For more information about the inCLASS, see <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/castl/project/in-class>