

Kelsey McCoy

Project Title: Learning Social and Emotional Skills in Head Start: Influence of Familial Risk Factors and Classroom Characteristics

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Project Abstract:

Social and emotional competence has a profound impact on healthy child development and is associated with numerous outcomes that persist across the lifespan (Bettencourt, Gross, Ho, & Perrin, 2017; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Whitted, 2011). Children enrolled in Head Start are at an increased risk for deficits in social and emotional skills (e.g., Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012) due to numerous familial risk factors across a bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Thus, it is critically important to support social and emotional learning in early childhood, particularly in Head Start programs where children have an increased risk for deficits.

The classroom is an important context that may have a unique role in fostering healthy development (Cooper & Lanza, 2014). A rapidly growing research base suggests that social and emotional skills (e.g., prosocial behaviors, identifying and managing emotions) can be taught through the use of systematic instructional approaches in the classroom, such as teacher-led stories, role-plays, and games (Payton et al., 2008; Tominey & McClelland, 2011). Within Head Start, social-emotional learning curricula have been shown to effectively teach targeted skills (Bierman et al., 2008; Upshur, Heyman, & Wenz-Gross, 2017). However, the existing literature on social-emotional learning curricula does not address differential impacts for children exposed to various risk factors within the family. Therefore, there is a need to understand how a social-emotional learning curriculum and exposure to a high-quality classroom environment may represent significant protective factors for children with numerous familial risks present.

Overall, the proposed study seeks to identify whether the presence and number of familial risk factors predict rates of change in social and emotional skills over the program year and how classroom characteristics may act to buffer or enhance these effects. The aims of the proposed study are to identify (a) the relationship of familial risk factors and classroom characteristics (e.g., teacher efficacy, fidelity to the curriculum, and classroom quality) with child social and emotional skills; (b) changes in child social and emotional skills from the beginning to the end of the program year; and (c) how cumulative familial risk, classroom characteristics, and their interaction impact acquisition of social and emotional skills from the beginning to the end of the program year. Data on approximately 140 children and families enrolled across eight Head Start classrooms will be utilized in this study. Data will include Head Start clinical records and teacher-reported measures on child social and emotional functioning. Analyses will utilize growth curve modeling to identify how the presence of familial risk and classroom characteristics influence social and emotional learning over the program year.

Information from this research will provide direction for improved fit between classroom characteristics and child needs. Results will also give insight into gaps in understanding how risk factors influence children's social and emotional skills and skill acquisition in the classroom, which will inform comprehensive training of teachers in responding to and supporting children exposed to a multitude of risk factors. Knowledge learned from this project will improve the effectiveness of Head Start, enhance child well-being, and protect against familial risk factors associated with living in poverty.