

The Impact of Preschool Social-Emotional Development on Academic Success of Elementary School Students

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Social and emotional development is considered as an important factor in child development, especially considering its importance in child school readiness. Social and emotional development consists of the relationships an individual has with others, the level of self-control, and the motivation and perseverance a person has during an activity. This study examined the relationship between children's preschool social and emotional development and their academic success in primary school. There were 96 children from Pristine participating in the study, 28 of them in the first grade, 32 in the second grade, 15 in the third grade and 21 in the fourth grade. To determine the relationship between children's social and emotional development, during their preschool years, the ELDS assessment form was used, while for their academic achievements in each grade, the ELDS assessment form was used for their grades in two subjects. Several hierarchical regressions were used to determine the relationship between children's social and emotional development, during their preschool years and their academic success. The results of this study revealed that the social and emotional development showed significant predictive value for the first, second and third grade criterion variables. While for the fourth grade, there was no significant predictive value.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Development; Academic Success; School Readiness

Introduction

Children entering school now are expected to come with the prerequisite skills for early literacy and math and the social maturity to comply with school routines. Some of them enter school with all of these skills and the disposition to use them. Others do not. One important reason for these variations in social competence rests in the quality of children's preschool experiences.

Decades of research show that high-quality early childhood programs are linked to greater social-emotional competence (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). High-quality programs are identified as those in which children learn many of the social skills that help them participate in a group as a cooperative member and learn to use adults to gain information and assistance.

Most preschool curricula focus primarily on building the child's cognitive skills. However, social-emotional skill deficits impact a student's academic performance, and remain a sometimes-overlooked characteristic of young children's transition to grade school (Child Trends, 2002; LaParo & Pianta, 2000).

In fact, school readiness is typically defined in terms of a child's cognitive skills, but also includes the child's capacity to regulate emotions and be able to show positive social interactions and cooperation in the classroom.

Despite the quality of children's earlier experiences, they come to school together and the teacher must develop this group of diverse learners into a community of respectful, moti-

vated learners.

Social-Emotional Development

Social and emotional development in children has to do with how children feel about themselves (such as confidence, always scared, eager to learn, proud of their culture, afraid of being wrong), how they behave (such as constantly fighting, easily upset, able to deal with conflict), and how they relate to others, especially people who matter to them (for example, parents, teachers, and friends).

Social-emotional development includes the emergence of emotional self-regulation, empathy, effective communication, positive social interaction, and social independence. Typically social-emotional development is divided into three main areas: attachment, initiative and self-control, also known as self-regulation.

Initiative is defined as a psychological feature that entices a person to achieve a desired goal (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 1998). Self-regulation is the process in which a person controls his or her own behavior through internal executive functions. Attachment is defined as a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969).

While a child's innate temperament matters, much of social behavior is learned. Children learn social behaviours and norms from interactions with parents, caregivers, siblings and peers (Emde, 1998; Harris, 1995). Studies of "prosocial" behaviours in childhood show that when such behavior is modeled by

adults, it is learned at an earlier age (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989). A two-year-old child can be socialised to display empathy towards others, adjust their responses to others' emotional expressions (social referencing), and try to make others feel better following a negative event (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Thompson, 1998). Children in preschool (four or five years old) must acquire understanding of emotions, and become more capable for managing their feelings.

Social-Emotional Development and School Readiness

School readiness is typically defined in terms of a child's cognitive skills, but also includes the child's capacity to regulate emotions and be able to show positive social interactions and cooperation in the classroom. The current emphasis on children's academic preparedness continues to overshadow the importance of children's social and emotional development for school readiness (Raver & Zigler, 1997). Over the past 20 years, researches have demonstrated that children's emotional and social skills are linked to their early academic standing (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Children with difficulties paying attention, following directions, getting along with others, and controlling negative emotions of anger and distress do less well in school (McClelland et al., 2000). For many children, academic achievement in their first few years of schooling appears to be built on a firm foundation of children's emotional and social skills (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; O'Neil et al., 1997).

Science has established a compelling link between social-emotional development and behavior and school success (Raver, 2002; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Young children cannot learn to read if they have problems that distract them from educational activities, problems following directions, problems getting along with others and controlling negative emotions, and problems that interfere with relationships with peers, teachers, and parents.

Social-Emotional Development and Academic Achievement

According to Howes, Hamilton, & Philipsen (1998), normatively, first friendships are established during the preschool years. The acquisition of prosocial friendship skills (such as helping, sharing, and taking turns) during preschool predict kindergarten and later elementary school engagement and academic success (Howes et al., 1998).

Also, prosocial behavior may foster positive relationships with teachers and peers, thereby motivating school bonding and creating feelings of social-emotional security and comfort in the classroom that support exploration and thereby enhance learning (Coolahan et al., 2000; Konold & Pianta, 2005).

Social-emotional skills include: emotional regulation; developing skills to communicate about emotions and resolve/avoid conflicts, showing empathy, demonstrating positive interactions and classroom cooperation, and the ability to take directions and conform to behavior norms expected in the classroom. Children learn self-monitoring and deliberate inhibition of undesired behaviours (Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998; Sroufe, 1996). Those children who are delayed in the development of social-emotional skills exhibit academic and behavioural problems (Blair, 2002; Connell & Prinz, 2002; Denham, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Methodology

This is a correlational study, with the main aim to determine the relationships between the students' pre-kindergarten social and emotional development and their academic success in first, second, third and fourth grade of elementary school.

Participants

A total of 96 primary school students participated in this study. During the last four years they attended a public preschool program. In 2012, 28 of them have completed first grade, 32 have completed second grade, 15 students have completed third grade and 21 students have completed fourth grade. For children's participation in the study parent's agreement was obtained.

Instruments

ELDS Assessment Form

At the end of each school year, preschool teachers completed an evaluation form for the achievement of each child during the year. The content of that evaluation form, for social-emotional development, was compared and adopted with the content of the field of social-emotional development of ELDS, recently developed and published. We estimate children social-emotional development with grades of E (excellent = 3), S (satisfactory = 2), or N (needs improvement = 1) of 24 observed behaviors, divided into five factors: 1-differentiations between known and unknown people (DKNP-Cronbach $a = .72$), 2-interaction with the persons around (IPA-Cronbach $a = .85$), 3-experience, recognise and properly express emotions (ER-PEE-Cronbach $a = .65$), 4-demonstrate that she/he knows the concept of her/himself (DKCHS-Cronbach $a = .67$), 5-ability of self-regulation of emotions (ASRE-Cronbach $a = .70$).

Academic Grades

The students' grades at the end of each academic year, from first to fourth grade, were also used to assess their academic success. Academic grades consisted in student's performance during the whole school year. Students received grades in mathematics and Albanian language (reading and writing).

Procedures

The method of linear regression analysis was used, in order to evaluate how well social and emotional development in pre-kindergarten predicts academic success from kindergarten until fourth grade. A specific child code for the identification of information was used. The statistical package used in the present study is SPSS Ver. 19.0.

Results

There were a series of multiple regressions used in this study to determine the relationship between the social and emotional factors and student academic success from preschool through grade four. Several hierarchical regressions were performed between the five social-emotional factors, measured in preschool, as the predictor variables and academic grades, (scores) as the criterion variables.

We used separate regressions for each academic grade in Albanian language (reading and writing) and mathematics from

preschool to fourth grade, to see the extent to which social-emotional factors may have influence (impact) on academic success throughout the years.

The results of **Table 1** show a great impact of social-emotional factors such as interaction with the persons around (IPA), experience, recognize and express emotions properly (ERPEE), and the ability of self-regulate emotions (ASRE) on academic success in the first grade.

In **Table 2**, results show that emotional factors such as interaction with the persons around (IPA) and the ability of self-regulate emotions (ASRE), can predict later academic success for students in the second grade. There are almost the same results within the third grade, presented in **Table 3**, where factors like experiences recognize and express emotions properly (ERPEE) and the ability of self-regulate emotions (ASRE), show high relationship level with academic success, while in **Table 4**, show no significant correlations between social-emotional development and academic success.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to determine the relationships between prekindergarten students' social and emotional development and later academic achievement, using the multiple regressions. Based on the results of separated multiple regressions analysis for each grade, it is obvious that there is a greater association between social-emotional development and academic achievement in elementary school, especially during the first three years. According to our results, there were no significant correlations between social-emotional development

Table 1.
Multiple regressions for variables predicting first grade success.

	BETA	St.Err. BETA	B	St.Err. of B	t	p-level
DKND	.13	.12	.20	.18	1.13	.27
IPA	.29	.13	.39	.17	2.18*	.03*
ERPEE	.44	.12	.73	.21	3.43*	.00*
DKCHS	.21	.13	.34	.22	1.57	.13
ASRE	.44	.13	.69	.21	3.16*	.00*
R = .84 R ² = .70						

Note: *p < .05.

Table 2.
Multiple regressions for variables predicting second grade success.

	BETA	St.Err. BETA	B	St.Err. of B	t	p-level
DKND	-.12	.15	-.18	.22	-.80	.42
IPA	.50	.16	.80	.25	3.13*	.00*
ERPEE	-.28	.15	-.41	.22	-1.84	.07
DKCHS	.14	.14	.23	.23	1.00	.32
ASRE	.72	.15	1.17	.25	4.71*	.00*
R = .74 R ² = .54						

Note: *p < .05.

Table 3.
Multiple regressions for variables predicting third grade success.

	BETA	St.Err. BETA	B	St.Err. of B	t	p-level
DKND	.39	.28	.51	.36	1.39	.19
IPA	.18	.26	.24	.34	.71	.48
ERPEE	.87	.24	1.27	.35	3.57*	.00*
DKCHS	.33	.24	.51	.37	1.37	.20
ASRE	.84	.36	1.21	.52	2.29*	.04*
R = .78 R ² = .61						

Note: *p < .05.

Table 4.
Multiple regressions for variables predicting fourth grade success.

	BETA	St.Err. BETA	B	St.Err. of B	t	p-level
DKND	-.01	.25	-.02	.32	-.06	.94
IPA	-.15	.24	-.20	.31	-.64	.52
ERPEE	.30	.24	.39	.32	1.24	.23
DKCHS	.16	.25	.22	.35	.66	.51
ASRE	.13	.25	.18	.34	.55	.58
R = .35 R ² = .12						

Note: *p < .05.

and academic success in the fourth grade. This may have several reasons. One of them could be due to the fact that students were assessed almost three years ago and during this time their social-emotional development may have been affected by changes in a child's environment. Another reason could be the teacher and class environment. Teachers promote specific skills, including anger management, behavioural self-control and expressive language capacity, which helps to avoid problem behaviours that interfere with children's learning and reinforce the basic rules of positive school conduct (Rimm-Kaufmann, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003).

While regarding the association between social-emotional development and academic achievement in elementary school, our findings are similar to the findings of previous research which found that social and emotional development can predict later academic success (Agostin & Bain, 1997; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Normandeu & Guay, 1998; Pianta & Harbers, 1996; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990; Slaughter-Defoe & Rubin, 2001; Smith & Walden, 2001; Stipek, 1993; Reynolds, 1989; Turner & Johnson, 2003; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

Children need a combination of intellectual skills, motivational qualities, and social-emotional skills to succeed in school (Thompson, 2002). With regard to that, Greenberg et al (2003), states that learning social and emotional skills is similar to learning other academic skills in that the effects of initial learning are enhanced over time to address the increasingly complex situations children face regarding academic achievement, social relationships, citizenship and health. In addition, several reviews found evidence of greater effectiveness in the early years (ages

2 - 7) than in older children (Tennant et al., 2007; Browne et al., 2004). "Learning is a social process" (Zins et al., 2004), and if we expect children to enter school "ready to learn" they must have the underlying security and emotional foundation for that learning. Social-emotional development is too important to be left to chance.

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