



## Research Paper

# Preschool classroom quality and social-emotional functioning: Findings across geographic regions



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined whether classroom quality is related to preschoolers' social-emotional functioning (social competence and behavior problems) and explored whether urbanicity (variation in geographic region: rural, small city, or large urban living) moderates this relation. Participants included 102 children (51% female) who were approximately 4.5 years old ( $M = 53.57$  months,  $SD = 5.42$ ). Fifty-one percent of children were enrolled in Head Start. Linear regression models indicated that classroom quality was moderately related to social competence and not significantly associated with behavior problems for the full sample; however, urbanicity moderated relations between quality and social competence and behavior problems. Specifically, higher classroom quality was significantly related to fewer externalizing behaviors and marginally related to fewer internalizing behaviors for children in rural communities, but not for children in small or large urban settings. Similarly, higher quality was associated with stronger social competence for children in small urban cities, but not for children in large urban cities. Discussion addresses the importance of the geographic regions families reside in as a context for children's development, and how early educational experiences may be particularly important for children living in rural and small urban communities.

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## 1. Introduction

A large body of evidence suggests that social-emotional functioning is imperative for school success (Denham, 2006; Denham & Brown, 2010). Specifically, the ability to cooperate with peers, regulate behaviors and emotions, and adapt to new social situations allows children to capitalize on learning opportunities in the classroom as well as develop and maintain positive relationships with peers and adults (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; McClelland, Cameron, Wanless, & Murray, 2007; Raver, 2004). The social-emotional skills that develop during the preschool period are particularly important and predict a host of short- and long-term outcomes, including school readiness, academic achievement, and the quality of relationships (Curby, Brown, Bassett, & Denham, 2015; Raver, 2004).

Previous research indicates that the quality of children's preschool environments may contribute to the development of social-emotional skills (Burchinal et al., 2008; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; Mashburn et al., 2008; Vandell, 2004); however, recent studies, including a meta-analysis, demonstrate that

high-quality preschool experiences may not be as predictive of social-emotional outcomes as once thought (Keys et al., 2013). There is some evidence to suggest that children from certain subgroups may benefit more from high levels of classroom quality, which could help explain mixed findings in the literature (Lipscomb, Schmitt, Pratt, Pears, & Acock, 2014; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Pratt, Lipscomb, & McClelland, 2015).

The geographic region within which families reside and the degree to which it is considered urban versus rural (i.e., urbanicity) has received increased attention as a key macrosystem context for young children's development and may be important to consider in developmental and education research (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013; Miller, Votruba-Drzal, & Setodji, 2013; Votruba-Drzal, Miller, & Coley, 2016). Striking variability exists between geographic regions in terms of kin networks, socialization processes, access to resources, and economic characteristics (Conger, 2013), yet it remains unclear if some regional contexts confer more risks than others. For example, one study found that compared to rural children, those living in urban regions tend to exhibit more behavior problems in school (Hope & Bierman, 1998), whereas other research suggests that school-based adjustment problems are more likely among children in rural versus urban schools (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). This mixed

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evidence suggests that the influence of urbanicity may be complex and may depend on other aspects of children's daily experiences, such as how children respond to preschool. Despite the potential importance of considering urbanicity when investigating developmental outcomes, scant research has focused on whether variation in this developmental context increases children's sensitivity to preschool classroom quality. The aims of the present study were to: 1) examine the extent to which preschool classroom quality is related to social-emotional functioning (i.e., social competence and externalizing and internalizing behavior problems) in a diverse sample of children, and 2) explore whether urbanicity moderates the relations between preschool classroom quality and children's social-emotional functioning.

### 1.1. The importance of early social-emotional functioning

The preschool years represent an important period of growth in social-emotional functioning. It is during this time that children are learning how to effectively interact with peers and adults and manage their emotions and behaviors in a school setting. As such, social-emotional functioning during early childhood is a foundational aspect of school readiness. In fact, in the United States, kindergarten teachers largely view children's school readiness in terms of social-emotional skills, such as the ability to get along with others and regulate attention (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). By kindergarten, children demonstrate wide variability in social-emotional functioning (West, Denton, & Reaney, 2000). In one study, 46% of kindergarten teachers in the United States reported that at least half of their students enter kindergarten lacking the social skills needed for classroom success (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000).

Social-emotional functioning is multifaceted in that it includes both positive (e.g., social competence) and negative (e.g., behavior problems) characteristics. Social competence refers to a set of behaviors that foster effective social interactions that are flexible, emotionally mature, and generally prosocial (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Social competence during early childhood has been positively linked with subsequent academic achievement (Curby et al., 2015; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). For example, in a Head Start sample, prosocial behaviors (a component of social competence) predicted stronger literacy and math skills at the start of the prekindergarten year, especially among girls (Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Gest, & Welsh, 2009).

In contrast to social competence, externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, such as inattention, problems with self-regulation, disruptive behavior, and difficulties with classroom rules and routines, are predictive of social and academic challenges throughout childhood (Bub, McCartney, & Willett, 2007; Ladd & Burgess, 1999; Mesman, Bongers, & Koot, 2001). For example, Bub et al. (2007) found that higher levels of these behavior problems during early childhood (at 24 months of age) predicted poorer cognitive skills and academic achievement in 1st grade. In another study, preschool behavior problems were predictive of mental health diagnoses in preadolescence (Mesman et al., 2001). Taken together, both the positive and negative aspects of preschool social-emotional functioning have implications for development and school success. Notably, the acquisition of social-emotional competency is a bilateral process, where children interact with their environment in order to learn how to effectively engage with peers and adults and regulate their behaviors within a structured learning setting (Denham, 2006).

### 1.2. Preschool classroom quality and social-emotional outcomes

In this study, we conceptualize preschool classroom quality as the nature of teacher-child interactions (Cassidy et al., 2005;

La Paro et al., 2004). Although several studies show positive effects of preschool classroom quality on academic outcomes (Keys et al., 2013), previous research is mixed with regard to the relation between classroom quality and children's social-emotional and behavioral outcomes. Some studies suggest that high-quality preschool experiences in the form of responsive and stimulating teacher-child interactions are predictors of young children's social-emotional functioning (Burchinal et al., 2008; La Paro et al., 2004; Mashburn et al., 2008; Vandell, 2004), yet others have reported no significant main effects of quality on these outcomes (Lipcomb et al., 2014; Pratt et al., 2015). Previous theoretical work has identified three important dimensions of classroom quality: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (Hamre et al., 2013). Teachers provide high-quality emotional support when they display and maintain a positive attitude towards children in their classrooms and are responsive to children's individualized needs. Classroom organization refers to a teacher's ability to use time and classroom management strategies effectively and to engage children in activities. Teachers provide high-quality instructional support when they offer a language-rich classroom environment and intentionally plan activities that facilitate higher-order thinking rather than relying on rote instruction. Theoretically speaking, these teacher behaviors should support the development of strong social-emotional functioning for young children; however, the significant effects that most studies have reported of preschool classroom quality on social-emotional functioning have been very small to moderate (Burchinal, Kainz, & Cai, 2011). Further, a recent meta-analysis found essentially null associations between quality and these outcomes (Keys et al., 2013).

Previous research suggests that certain subgroups of children may benefit more from high-quality preschool experiences (Lipscomb et al., 2014; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Phillips, Fox, & Gunnar, 2011; Pratt et al., 2015), which could help explain mixed findings. For example, the compensatory hypothesis suggests that children who come from high-risk family backgrounds will benefit more from high-quality school experiences (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). There is some empirical evidence to support this hypothesis. In one study, prekindergarten children who were from low-income backgrounds and living in non-parental care, a particularly high-risk subgroup, experienced greater reductions in externalizing behaviors from positive teacher-child interactions than children who were from low-income families and living with biological, adoptive, or step-parents (Lipscomb et al., 2014). Other studies have shown that the effects of high-quality preschool are stronger for decreasing problem behaviors in children from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to children from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). For instance, Keys et al. (2013) reported that preschool classroom quality was a more robust predictor of gains in social skills for children of mothers with a high school degree or less relative to children whose mothers had at least some college experience, although there were few differential effects for classroom quality on academic outcomes and behavior problems. Existing studies investigating differential effects of classroom quality on social-emotional functioning have only explored demographic characteristics (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) or child characteristics at school entry (e.g., cognitive skills, externalizing problems) as potential moderators. To our knowledge, no studies to date have examined whether urbanicity plays a moderating role in the relation between preschool classroom quality and social-emotional functioning.

### 1.3. Differences in environment and development across geographic regions

Striking contextual differences exist across geographic regions that may contribute to children's development, including popula-

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