



Improving school readiness of high-risk preschoolers: Combining high quality instructional strategies with responsive training for teachers and parents



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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated whether the combination of two proven interventions, one in Head Start classrooms (The Early Education Model, TEEM) and one in the home (Play and Learning Strategies, PALS) resulted in enhanced effects on at-risk 3- to 5-year-old children's school readiness skills when compared to either of these interventions alone. Teachers and parents were trained to use a responsive style and strategies that supported children's school readiness skills with the goal of providing children consistency in responsive practices across the school and home environments. The study was conducted in 77 classrooms with teachers randomized to either the TEEM ($n = 39$) or No TEEM (i.e., control or business as usual, $n = 38$) conditions. Six to eight children in each classroom were randomly assigned to either have their parents receive PALS ($n = 314$; 210 after attrition) or to a No PALS condition ($n = 309$; 221 after attrition) resulting in four conditions: TEEM/PALS, TEEM/No PALS, No TEEM/PALS, and No TEEM/No PALS. Results showed greater gains in the TEEM teachers' language and literacy instructional practices and sensitivity compared to control teachers, but there were few significant findings for child cognitive outcomes. Parents receiving PALS, as compared to those without PALS, showed greater increases across play and book reading contexts in numerous responsive behaviors linked to the attachment and socio-cultural theories. Children whose parents received PALS versus those whose parents did not showed greater gains in direct measures of print knowledge and self-regulation and in social and language skills observed during interactions with their parent. Interactive effects of TEEM plus PALS were seen for increased engagement in shared book reading but not for other cognitive or social outcomes.

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1. Introduction

There is growing consensus that providing young children, particularly those from low socioeconomic status (SES) homes, with high-quality classroom experiences prior to entering kindergarten is a key to closing a well-documented achievement gap (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). High quality prekindergarten (pre-k) experiences increase the likelihood that children will enter school with the skills necessary for academic success (e.g., Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010). However, many existing pre-k programs are not of high enough quality to assure that children from higher risk backgrounds will

get the learning experiences they need to be school ready (e.g., Burchinal, Kainz, & Cai, 2011). For example, in the most recent impact study of Head Start, a federally funded preschool program for children from very low-SES homes, only a few small positive effects in cognitive and social skills occurred across pre-k, and these did not persist through first grade (USDHHS & ACF, 2010). Also, interventions implemented to enhance the effectiveness of pre-k programs, like Head Start, have yielded mixed results, and when there are improvements they are often small (Burchinal et al., 2011).

One potential solution to this problem of small impacts for many pre-k programs serving low-SES students is to increase parent responsiveness and support for school readiness in children's home environments. Many pre-k programs, particularly Head Start, acknowledge the importance of having a parent component (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992), but parent involvement varies greatly across

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Head Start programs due, in part, to the quality of parenting programs chosen (Cooper & Lanza, 2014). There are few examples of Head Start programs incorporating parent programs that have evidence of effectiveness from experimental studies (Cooper & Lanza, 2014). There is a dearth of experimental studies evaluating effects on young children's school readiness of a combined approach in which a high-quality pre-k classroom program is paired with an evidence-based parent program. This study examined the individual and combined impact of a school and home intervention that have both been shown to be effective.

1.1. Rationale for intervening in the home and classroom

Children from low-SES backgrounds often enter preschool behind in school readiness skills (e.g., Son & Morrison, 2010). *School readiness* is a multidimensional construct including cognitive skills (e.g., oral language, early literacy), social and behavioral skills, and self-regulation skills. The learning gains required for children from high-risk homes to be prepared for school are often not realized and can ultimately contribute to high dropout rates (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013) or reduced benefits from schooling (Lynch, Law, Brinkman, Chittleborough, & Sawyer, 2010). Early childhood teachers' ability to provide the quality and intensity of learning experiences necessary for children from low-SES backgrounds to "catch up" in their development is hindered by many factors, one of which is teachers' limited professional preparation and knowledge (Burns, Donovan, & Bowman, 2000). Educating young children requires teachers to have a deep understanding of curriculum content, pay attention to individual learning needs, and reflect on their teaching practices (e.g., Burns et al., 2000).

Research demonstrates that caregivers in the home environment can facilitate young children's development of cognitive and social skills so they are better prepared to enter school (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003). However, this is less likely to happen in homes where parents have limited education and low incomes. Multiple life stresses, poor parental role models, and a limited understanding of their important role as their child's teacher are contributing factors to this cycle (e.g., McLoyd & Wilson, 1990). Poverty is associated with low levels of rich language input (Hart & Risley, 1995), decreased experiences with books (Federal Interagency Forum on Child & Family Statistics, 2009), less responsiveness to children's signals and needs (Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001), and more frequent use of power-assertive techniques (McLoyd, 1990; Van Zeijl et al., 2006). Thus, children from low-SES backgrounds are less likely to experience parenting behaviors known to predict more optimal school outcomes (e.g., Wakschlag & Hans, 1999).

Given the pragmatic challenges of preparing children from low-SES backgrounds for school and research demonstrating the importance of responsive adults in supporting children's development, intervening in both the classroom and home environments may best promote children's school readiness. Theoretical frameworks that consider person-environment fit (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and correlational research (Barbarin, Downer, Odem, & Head, 2010) suggest that providing pre-k children with congruent teacher and parent emotionally responsive, cognitively stimulating practices optimally supports school readiness. In turn, better alignment between these two environments may allow children to use their cognitive and emotional resources to learn more from their interactions with more competent adults. We further detail theoretical and empirical support for this theory of change below.

1.2. The value of responsive parenting practices

Parenting research across different theories and research frameworks (e.g., attachment: Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall,

1978; socio-cultural: Rogoff, 1990) describes the importance of responsive adults for children's optimal early development. *Responsiveness* encompasses a range of emotionally and cognitively responsive adult behaviors and practices that collectively support children's social, behavioral, self-regulation and cognitive skills (e.g., Bornstein & Tamis-LeMonda, 1989; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Emotionally responsive parenting includes high levels of warm, reciprocal behaviors that acknowledge children's signals and needs in ways that are prompt and contingent to what children are signaling (e.g., Dunst & Kassow, 2008). Cognitively responsive parenting integrates rich language input and actions that build on and scaffold children's interests so children are appropriately challenged and supported as they learn new concepts and skills (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001). Following the child's lead and responding contingently are thought to support learning, in part, by facilitating the child's development of mechanisms for coping with stress and novelty in his or her environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). With repeated experiences of these responsive practices, trust is formed between the caregiver and child that allows the child to internalize this sense of security and generalize learning to new experiences. Evidence from experimental responsive parenting interventions demonstrates that when responsive practices are increased, children show gains in independent problem-solving, language, and social skills (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2003; Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008) as well as behavioral development (Van Zeijl et al., 2006).

1.3. The potential value of combined parent and teacher interventions

A central hypothesis of the current study was that children would benefit from the interactive effect of providing both high quality, responsive instruction in preschool *and* a responsive parenting intervention. There are several reasons for this expectation. As teachers are learning to implement organizational strategies, activities, and responsive interactions with children that promote language development, pre-literacy skills, and self-regulation, parents are simultaneously learning related skills at home, including how to promote their children's language skills, increase children's focused attention, manage behavior using positive strategies, and increase interactive book-reading. Thus, children may be receiving more exposure to activities that promote language, literacy, and attention-focusing skills than they would if only the home *or* school environment were receiving intervention (i.e., additional dosage). A second reason to expect an enhanced effect of this dual intervention model is related to increased alignment between home and school expectations and practices, which provides greater consistency for children. Churchill (2003) examined the concept of "goodness of fit" between the alignment of Head Start parents' and teachers' expectations of children and parenting behaviors, and found that the fit between parent and teacher was significantly positively correlated with children's observed social skills.

Few studies have experimentally examined the effects of parent-plus-teacher interventions on school readiness skills. A few have specifically examined the effects of dialogic reading interventions, programs that train adults to do shared book reading to support children's language development (see Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Dialogic reading studies have produced mixed results when examining a parent-plus-teacher approach. One study reported better language outcomes for classroom only and classroom-plus-home interventions relative to a control group (Whitehurst et al., 1994), while another study found effects were largest for a home only condition, not a combination of a home and classroom intervention (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). Yet another study examining a print referencing style of shared reading found

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