Classroom quality and Chinese preschool Children's approaches to learning

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ABSTRACT

Using a large and representative sample of 1882 children from 60 preschools in China, this study examined how classroom quality was associated with preschool children’s approaches to learning. Certified observers rated classroom quality using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) according to three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Furthermore, the Preschool Learning Behavior Scale (PLBS; McDermott, Rikoon, Waterman, & Fantuzzo, 2012) was used to measure the children’s approaches to learning through three dimensions: competence motivation (CM), learning strategy (LS), and attention/persistence (AP). Hierarchical linear modeling results showed that after controlling for the children’s gender, sibling status, and family socioeconomic status, emotional support had positive relationship with their LS and AP. Classroom organization had negative relationship with children’s LS and AP. No relationship was found between classroom quality and CM. Our findings highlight the importance of enhancing classroom quality to foster children’s positive learning behavior in preschool classrooms.

1. Introduction

In recent years, approaches to learning (ATL) have received great attention from researchers internationally as a critical foundation of child development (Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzal, Maldonado-Carreño, & Haas, 2010; McDermott, Rikoon, & Fantuzzo, 2014). Studies have shown that ATL are mechanisms that help all children to achieve positive academic outcomes regardless of their backgrounds (Fantuzzo et al., 2007; Li-Grining et al., 2010; McWayne, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2004). Recent research has suggested that teacher-related factors (e.g., teaching style, the teacher-child relationship, and teaching quality) can promote positive learning behavior, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dominguez, Vitiello, Fuccillo, Greenfield, & Bulewsky-Shearer, 2011). It is important to gain insights into the teaching process, as it is a point of leverage to help children to develop positive learning behavior and overcome family demographic risks and provides a powerful mechanism for decoupling the strong link between economic status and educational opportunities.

In this study, we were interested in examining how classroom quality in Chinese schools was associated with children’s ATL and accounts for their personal attributes (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, and sibling status). Recently, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2012) added “approaches to learning” as one of the six foundational school readiness domains in its newly issued national Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children 3 to 6. For many years, the Chinese government has issued many incentives to help improve the developmental and learning outcomes of children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds through the provision of qualified preschool experiences (Hu, Zhou, Li, & Roberts, 2014). This is noteworthy because only a few studies have considered Chinese children’s learning behavior (e.g., Wang, Feng, Xiao, & Cang, 2010; Wanless et al., 2011) and none has examined the link between teaching practices and Chinese children’s ATL. In this study, we aimed to extend the current knowledge of teaching and ATL by examining teacher-child interactions and ATL in the structured whole-group teaching context. Our findings should enhance our understanding of children’s ATL in the Chinese context.

1.1. What are approaches to learning, and why are they so important to children’s development?

ATL are the mechanisms underlying how children initiate, engage in, and complete learning tasks, measured through the observable behavioral patterns children exhibit as they respond to different learning situations (McDermott, Mordell, & Stoltzfus, 2001). Since Kagan and colleagues first introduced the concept of ATL in the context of school readiness in Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995, professionals have widely acknowledged it as a major developmental domain (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2005). Early childhood ATL are conceptualized
within a broader domain of cognitive orientations that support learning behaviors, or more specifically the observable manners that facilitate or inhibit children's engagement in the classroom or other learning environments (Fantuzzo, Perry, & McDermott, 2004). One widely used measure for preschool children's ATL is the teacher-rated Preschool Learning Behavior Scale (PLBS; McDermott et al., 2012). The PLBS includes three distinctive dimensions: competence motivation (CM), attention/persistence (AP), and learning strategy (LS). The CM dimension reflects children's willingness to take on tasks and their determination to complete activities successfully. The AP dimension comprises items related to the degree to which children pay attention to and are able to persist in difficult tasks. The LS dimension reflects the way in which a child approaches tasks and solves problems. The PLBS has been validated in many cultures, including the U.S. (McDermott et al., 2012), Peru (Hahn, Schaefer, Merino, & Worrell, 2009), and China (Wu, Hu, & Fan, 2016).

ATL play a key role in determining children's school readiness and are pivotal in shaping children's long-term achievements (Duncan et al., 2007). Some longitudinal studies have found that teachers' ratings of children's ATL are positively linked to the children's developmental trajectories in math and reading (Li-Grining et al., 2010); the higher the teacher's rating, the better the developmental trajectory of the child. Some studies have revealed that learning behavior is uniquely related to the growth of a child's reading and mathematics skills between kindergarten and second grade (McClelland, Ackoc, & Morrison, 2006; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). Similarly, learning behavior has been shown to have a positive effect on the growth of a child's mathematical skills from kindergarten to third grade (DiPerna, Lei, & Reid, 2007). McDermott et al. (2014) also found that children who graduated from Head Start programs and ultimately failed academically showed early signs of being less motivated to learn and that their motivation deteriorated as they progressed into their formal school years. However, Head Start children who sustained adequate achievements by the end of second grade were able to maintain their motivation and persistence level throughout preschool and their early school grade years. Stipek, Newton, and Chudgar (2010) found some support for a "multiplicative effect of beginning school with strong learning-related behaviors" (p. 392), suggesting that more adaptive learning behavior during early years leads to better literacy skills, which in turn strengthens learning behavior. Therefore, recognizing their importance to children's school readiness, ATL appear to be the target area for early intervention efforts. It is important to capture the attributing factors of Chinese children's ATL development to provide teachers with insights into how to adopt early intervention strategies in a timely manner.

1.2. Conceptual base of the current study

The ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) provides a framework for us to understand the multiple levels of influence on children's ATL. Children's development is shaped by not only their individual characteristics, but also the proximal environments in which they develop (e.g., preschool classrooms) (Domínguez et al., 2011). Under this model, children's development stems largely from teacher-child interactions, which constitute the proximal processes for learning. As children start preschool at the age of 3, they spend a significant amount of time in the school environment each day. Their development can be influenced by many preschool features, most significantly the way the teacher implements the curriculum and how the teacher forms relationships with the children during academic and social exchanges. The current study took an ecological approach to understand how teacher-child interaction quality relates to children's approaches to learning when individual factors such as gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and sibling status are accounted for.

1.3. Individual factors related to children's ATL

Research has proposed that children with poor learning skills share a number of family and sociocultural characteristics, such as poorer family learning environments (McClelland et al., 2006). Studies have also found that children from families with low SES show significantly poorer academic skills and cognitive competence on average when they begin to attend school than those with more advantaged backgrounds (Bryant, Burchinal, Lau, & Sparling, 1994; Stipek & Ryan, 1997). Gender also plays a role in children's ATL development. Some studies have shown that girls typically perform better than boys on attention tasks during preschool years (Childs & McKay, 2001) and that the relationship between children's early ATL and academic trajectories vary by gender (Li-Grining et al., 2010). So far, no study has looked at the effect of sibling status on children's ATL. As a result of the one-child policy, especially in urban China, there is a large population of children without siblings. The status of single children is unique in Chinese culture and may affect the children's ATL, as these children receive a lot of extra attention from their families and are privileged in terms of their resources and adult supports. The parents of an only child may be more responsive to the child's needs, which may produce a greater sense of security, confidence, and intellectual competence development in the child. However, due to the over-attention, higher expectations, and pressure to be successful in life placed on the single child, parents are always more involved in their child's learning. Considering the large population of children without siblings in modern China, it is important for us to have a better understanding of any differences in ATL between the two groups (i.e., children with or without siblings). This would allow us to inform professionals how to support both groups of children in a better way.

1.4. Quality of teacher-child interactions and preschool children's ATL

According to previous research, how teachers interact with children in their academic and social exchanges has been shown to have a strong effect on children's motivation, persistence, attention, and other learning behavior (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). The moment-to-moment teacher-child interactions in classrooms are most comprehensively articulated in the teaching-through-interactions framework, which can be conceptually organized into three distinct domains: emotional support (ES), classroom organization (CO), and instructional support (INS) (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Teachers who provide high ES build positive relationships with students and show sensitivity in meeting students' learning and behavioral needs. Teachers' sensitivity and "child-centeredness" have also been associated with children's motivation, pride in accomplishments, and committed compliance (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995; Wachs, Gurkas, & Kontos, 2004). Wentzel (1999, 2002) suggesting that students who see teachers as supportive are more likely to pursue goals valued by teachers, such as engagement in academic activities.

Teachers in classrooms with high CO manage behavior proactively by setting clear expectations and consistently enforcing consequences as they keep students busy engaged in activities. In particular, researchers have found a link between teachers' higher levels of CO and children's self-regulatory and related skills (Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). High levels of CO have been shown to predict changes in preschool children's learning behavior (Domínguez et al., 2011). The strongest evidence for the importance of CO and management comes from intervention studies. The children in classrooms in which teachers participate in designed interventions to enhance the CO and management aspects of their teaching demonstrate improvements in the teachers' reported and observed self-regulatory skills (e.g., Raver et al., 2009). Classrooms in which more time is spent on organizational activities at the beginning of the school year have been associated with greater behavioral and cognitive self-
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