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Impact of Classroom Quality and Preschool Experiences on Executive Functioning (EF)
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Executive function (EF) skills are a group of cognitive processes including processing speed, working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility. Evidence shows that chronic exposure to poverty and certain psychological stressors related to poverty can predict children’s EF at four-years-old (Raver, Blair, & Willoughby, 2013). High-quality teacher-child interactions involving high levels of classroom organization and emotional support may act as a protective factor for EF skills for children living in poverty (Choi et al., 2016).

Method

Participants

- 45 preschool classrooms, each including about 7 children who participated in the study.
- Mean age of children in the preschool classrooms was 4.3 years old (53% male).
- On average, 62% (SD = 35%) of the children in each classroom had family incomes below $25,000 per year. The range was from 0% of children in a classroom living in homes with incomes below the poverty line to 100% of the children in a classroom living in homes with incomes below the poverty line.

Materials

- EF was measured with the Minnesota Executive Functioning Scale (MEFS).
- Classroom organization and emotional support was measured using the Conscious Discipline fidelity rubric. Scores ranged from 1 - 4, with 4 being the highest score.
- Conscious Discipline is a socio-emotional classroom management program designed to help children achieve goals, problem solve, resolve conflicts, and regulate emotions.
- Here, we report on Conscious Discipline fidelity scores for classrooms in the following areas:
  - Brain Smart Start- activities to help join together, eliminate stress, and commit. It helps the class unite their brains, minds and bodies.
  - Greeting/Goodbye Ritual- links children and families, and helps alleviate stress from the home to school transition.
  - Safekeeper Ritual- the idea that the teacher will ensure the safety of the classroom, and the class can help keep it safe.
  - Meaningful Jobs- all children have a job or chore each day that allows them to contribute to the classroom.
  - Class Meeting- organized time to help children problem solve, as well as have open discussions about consequences.

Results

- Classroom organization and emotional support scores for classrooms in the following areas:
  - Classroom Proportion of Children Living Above Poverty Line
  - Impact of Classroom Conscious Discipline Behavior Management Scores on Preschoolers’ MEFS Scores

Conclusion

- Classrooms with a greater proportion of children above the poverty line have higher EF scores at the start of preschool.
- However, classrooms where Conscious Discipline fidelity scores were higher had children who made more gains in EF skills, above and beyond the effect of family income.

References
