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Positive Engagement in Preschool Key to Developmental Gains

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Low-Income Ethnically Diverse Children's Engagement as a Predictor of School Readiness Above Preschool Classroom Quality

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Many interventions and programs designed to improve low-income children's lives focus on providing high-quality early-childhood education. Preschool classrooms that are emotionally supportive, well-organized, and cognitively stimulating can help boost children's learning and development. Yet for the most part, focusing on the quality of early-childhood education has emphasized teachers, often missing the central role that children play in their own development. A new study has found that children's individual engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks was important to the gains they made during the preschool year, even after taking into account differences in classroom quality.

The study, conducted by researchers at Northwestern University, Montana State University Billings, and the University of Virginia, is published in the journal *Child Development*.

"Children can have very different experiences in the same classroom and their individual engagement is associated with their learning gains above and beyond the average quality of classroom instruction," explains Terri J. Sabol, assistant professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University, who led the study. "It's important to look beyond overall classroom quality and capture children's individual experiences in classroom settings."

The study looked at 211 low-income, racially and ethnically diverse 4-year-olds in 49 classrooms in state and federally funded preschool programs. Researchers measured the children's engagement in the classroom by observing their positive and negative interactions with teachers, peers, and tasks (e.g., their ability to communicate with teachers, sociability and assertiveness with peers, self-reliance in tasks, conflicts with teachers and peers).

The quality of the classroom setting was also measured (e.g., the classroom climate, teachers' sensitivity, emotional support, classroom organization), and children were assessed on measures of school readiness in the fall and the spring of their preschool year. Most previous research has examined either the effect of

classroom interactions or the role of individual children's engagement in the classroom on children's outcomes; this study included both.

"To truly understand and support individual children's development, it is vital that we have observational tools that capture individual children's engagement and the overall classroom context," notes Natalie Bohlmann, associate professor of education at Montana State University Billings, who collaborated on the study.

Children's individual engagement was related to their developmental gains, even after accounting for emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support at the classroom level, the study found. Specifically, children's positive engagement with teachers was related to improved literacy skills and their positive engagement with peers was related to improved language and self-regulatory skills. In addition, their positive engagement with tasks related to closer relationships with teachers.

Children who were negatively engaged in the classroom (e.g., those who got into conflicts with teachers or peers) were at a comparative disadvantage in terms of their school readiness, the study found. Children with higher levels of negative engagement performed at lower levels across nearly all of the academic, language, and social outcomes measured, including lower language, literacy, and selfregulatory skills.

"Interventions designed to prepare children for school should include a focus on children's individual behaviors in the classroom," adds Jason Downer, associate professor of education at the University of Virginia, who was the lead investigator. "Observing children's engagement can guide decisions about where, when, and how to intervene with at-risk children, and help educators enact more useful individualized strategies in the classroom."

The study was supported by the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Interagency Consortium on Measurement of School Readiness, as well as by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Low-Income Ethnically Diverse Children's Engagement as a Predictor of School Readiness Above Preschool Classroom Quality by Sabol, TJ (Northwestern University), Bohlmann, NL (Montana State University Billings), and Downer, JT (University of Virginia). Copyright 2017 The Society for

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