Investigating Processes Through Which Families, Schools, and Communities Can Collaborate to Promote Social and Emotional Skill Development

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Executive Summary

In order for schools, families, and communities to effectively come together to support social and emotional development in early childhood a shared language is needed. In an effort to begin to develop this shared language, we conducted discussion groups designed to engage parents and community members in a conversation regarding the concepts and practices of social and emotional development, the importance of promoting social and emotional skill development in early childhood, and their significant roles in this development. Parents and community members in the greater Stamford area participated in the discussion groups, including a subgroup of parents whose children are participating in the development of Preschool RULER, a theoretically-based approach for developing emotional intelligence in preschool children and the key adults involved in their education (i.e., teachers, early childhood administrators, family members). Using a participatory inquiry approach to our learning, we found that it is critical for parents to recognize their influence on young children who are in the early stages of developing social and emotional skills; that self-care and emotional self-awareness are essential; and that promoting collaboration and partnerships between schools, families, and communities involves building strong relationships and engaging families on multiple levels. We also sought to share the conversation and learning that occurred with parents and community members by reaching out to and connecting with Discovery Communities throughout Connecticut. In addition to sharing our findings with Discovery Community leaders, we discussed avenues through which to extend a shared language regarding social and emotional development in early childhood across Connecticut. An increase in collaborative efforts by educators, parents, and community members to support social and emotional development in early childhood across the state is recommended in order to support young children's early and future success.

Introduction and Background

In recent years, increasing emphasis has been placed on accountability for academic achievement in the U.S. public education system. As a result, pressure is put upon teachers at all grade levels to adopt a strict academic focus to ensure that children meet required benchmarks on standardized tests. Children need strong social and emotional skills in preschool to benefit from academic environments (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003); however, many children enter kindergarten with underdeveloped social and emotional skills (Blair, 2002).

Schools, families, and communities all play a critical role in children's early social and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006). Consistent with ecological systems theory, a child's development is influenced by multiple interrelated environments and contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Coordinated efforts by adults in the home, school, and community environments to support social and emotional skill development allow children to have consistency and continuity as they develop and practice new skills (Albright, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011).

Defining Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional development is an umbrella term referring to a composite of related skills including social competence and self-regulation (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005). Social competence includes communication skills, empathy, and the ability to be effective in social interactions (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006). Self-regulation refers to the conscious control of thoughts and actions and includes the ability to understand and regulate one's emotions. The skills of emotion understanding and regulation are critical for the development of social competence (Blair, 2002; McClelland, Cameron, Wanless, & Murray, 2007). Both social competence and self-regulation are important predictors of academic success (McClelland et al., 2007; Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007; Spinrad et al., 2006).

Developing Social and Emotional Skills at Home and at School

The foundations for social and emotional skills are developed within the home. At home, processes that influence social and emotional development include parenting practices and the attachment relationship between the parent (or caregiver) and the child (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010; Calkins, 2004; Fabes, Gaertner, Popp, McCartney, & Phillips, 2006). For example, parents who use an authoritative parenting style, which is a style characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and developmentally appropriate limit-setting/autonomy-granting (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), promote the development of a secure attachment and strong social and emotional

skills (Bowlby, 1988; Morris et al., 2007; Stack, Serbin, Enns, Ruttle, & Barrieau, 2010). In contrast, children of parents who use a punitive style of parenting are more likely to struggle with social and emotional skills (Hill, 2001; Lareau & Weininger, 2008).

When children enter school, the foundations laid at home transfer to interactions with peers and teachers. Prior to kindergarten entry, more than 80% of children in the United States attend preschool programs (Denton Flanagan & McPhee, 2009), making preschool an important setting for the development of social and emotional skills. For most children, the preschool classroom is the first environment outside of the family in which they are asked to demonstrate social and emotional skills (Phillips, McCartney, & Sussman, 2006). During preschool, children exhibit significant language development (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006) and brain development in the prefrontal cortex (Blair, 2002), both of which are related to the development of social and emotional skills (Blair, 2002; Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). This significant developmental growth, coupled with the high number of children attending preschool, make the preschool years an important period for programs targeting children's social and emotional development.

Research suggests that as a whole, preschool programs are struggling with promoting the social and emotional skills that children need for the transition to kindergarten and academic success in elementary school (Howes et al., 2008; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). Alarmingly, the expulsion rate for preschoolers is higher than the expulsion rate for all other grades (K-12) combined (Gilliam & Shabar, 2006), which has been linked to behavioral difficulties exhibited by children who struggle with social and emotional skill deficits. The inclusion of social and emotional development in teacher training for early childhood educators is highly varied (Tominey & Rivers, 2012). Although educators report learning about the importance of social and emotional development, they often report that they lack strategies for effectively promoting these skills (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The struggles experienced by early childhood educators to effectively promote social and emotional skills may also be evidence of a failure to adequately engage and involve family and community members.

Promoting Social and Emotional Development in Preschool

In recent years, numerous social and emotional skills interventions have emerged (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007; Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Fitzgerald & Edstrom, 2006; Pears, Fisher, & Bronz, 2007; Tominey & McClelland, 2011; Webster-Stratton, Reid, McCartney, & Phillips, 2006). These interventions are primarily school-based, although some do include small parent components, such as handouts that children take home to complete with their families. A growing body of research is showing that in order to promote lasting change in social and emotional development, it is

critical for programs to extend beyond the classroom in ways that promote a shared language and a mutually-supportive relationship between school, home, and community. Accordingly, it is important to understand how preschool programming can better leverage family and community engagement in promoting preschoolers' social and emotional skills.

Preschool RULER, a school-based program currently in development (Rivers, Tominey, O'Bryon, & Brackett, 2013), may be an ideal platform for exploring ways to talk about and identify the needs of family and community members in children's social and emotional skill development. First, the foundation for Preschool RULER is RULER, which is currently in use in kindergarten through eighth (K-8) grade classrooms around the country (Brackett et al., 2011; Maurer & Brackett, 2004). RULER is an evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning that has been found to significantly improve the emotional climate in schools (Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2013). Moreover, the skills that RULER teaches are related to better academic achievement (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012) and socially competent behavior in the classroom (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011). Second, RULER emphasizes that everyone involved in a child's life should be involved in the program as teachers, administrators, parents and caregivers, and members of the community are all important teachers and models of social-emotional skills for children, and this is especially critical for Preschool RULER. A federal grant from the Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences is supporting our development of Preschool RULER, which includes creating, implementing, and testing the program in the Childcare Learning Centers (Stamford, CT).

Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to engage parents and community members in a discussion regarding the concepts and practices of social and emotional development, the importance of promoting social and emotional skill development in early childhood, and their significant roles in this development. A discussion group format allowed facilitators to share key information while also encouraging active participation, communication among participants, and joint meaning making. Through participatory inquiry, our overarching goal was to begin to develop a shared language among schools, families, and communities regarding social and emotional development in early childhood. An additional goal was to reach out and connect with Discovery Communities in order to share the conversation and learning that occurred during our parent discussion groups and to discuss ways through which to extend a shared language regarding social and emotional development in childhood across the state. The current project builds upon the efforts of our Preschool RULER development work to engage schools, families, and communities in the process of supporting social and emotional skill development in early childhood.

Method

Participants

Fifteen parents and community members participated in discussion groups focused on developing a shared language regarding social and emotional development in early childhood. Three parent discussion groups were held. The first two discussion groups included families of children attending the Childcare Learning Centers in Stamford, Connecticut, the largest preschool provider in the city. The Childcare Learning Centers are serving as a lab school for the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence in the development of Preschool RULER. Ninety percent of Childcare Learning Center families are earning below 75% of the Connecticut median income, 60% are Hispanic (many from exclusively Spanish-speaking homes) and 27% are African American (Childcare Learning Centers, 2012). The third parent discussion group extended beyond the Childcare Learning Centers to include parents of children attending other local Stamford early childhood education programs.

Six Discovery Community leaders participated in a fourth discussion group designed to share and extend the learning from our parent discussion groups. Participants included leaders from Stamford, Danbury, Norwalk, Bridgeport, and Greenwich. Discovery Community leaders in Stamford worked closely with the research team throughout the project as strategic thinkers. They provided input

regarding effective family engagement strategies, as well as ways to engage other Discovery Communities in our work.

Procedure

Prior to beginning the study, Yale University's Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the methods and procedures. Potential participants from the Childcare Learning Centers were recruited for the initial two discussion groups. To recruit families, we set up a table at the center and spoke with parents during morning drop off. The purpose of the study was explained (in either English or Spanish) and potential participants were informed that childcare and refreshments would be provided, in addition to $50 compensation for participating in a 90-minute, audiotaped discussion group. Written recruitment materials (in English and Spanish) were also provided and interested parents had the option to sign up for either a morning or evening discussion group. Parents who signed up to participate provided their phone numbers and were contacted as a reminder the day before the discussion groups. Reminder cards with the day and time of the discussion group were also distributed to parents who signed up to participate.

To recruit parents for the third discussion group, we reached out to Stamford Discovery Community contacts who work with families from local daycares and private preschools in the Stamford community. These contacts shared information about the discussion group with families. Interested families contacted the researchers in order to sign up and participate. Informed consent procedures were administered to parents who attended each discussion group. The study goals, risks, and benefits were explained (in English or Spanish) and participants were asked to sign the consent form if they wished to participate in the study. Each of the audiotaped discussion groups were then reviewed and analyzed to identify salient themes.

For the fourth discussion group, an email invitation was sent jointly from our research team and the Stamford Discovery Community to leaders from other cities. This invitation described our two goals: to share and discuss the learning that occurred during our parent discussion groups, and to brainstorm potential avenues through which to effectively extend a shared language regarding social and emotional development in early childhood across the state. Interested leaders responded via e-mail and attended a 90-minute discussion group where refreshments were provided.

Descriptions of Discussion Groups

Parent Discussion Groups

To begin our conversations with parents around social and emotional development in early childhood, we discussed parents' experiences with two "hot topic" experiences for preschool parents: bedtime and tantrums. These are areas that can be challenging and can generate strong emotions in children and parents. In the context of bedtime or tantrums we discussed how powerful an influence parents are and the key roles they play in their children's development of social and emotional skills. We facilitated a discussion between parents regarding their feelings before, during, and after bedtime or tantrums; their children's feelings; and their own strategies for regulating the strong emotions experienced during these challenging times. We then talked about the value of young children having the opportunity to hear and see their parents regulating strong emotions (i.e., parents saying "I feel angry because _____ and I need to take a break to cool down"). The importance of parents taking care of themselves and seeking support when needed was also discussed, as was the need for emotional self-awareness. Additionally, we discussed how adults' feelings affect children's feelings (and vice versa), and how children are tuned into their parents' emotions and how they handle strong emotions. Our initial discussion underscored the importance of promoting social and emotional development in early childhood, as well as parents' meaningful impact on their children's development.

We then introduced and discussed the Mood Meter as a tool that we have been using with preschoolers (and teachers and administrators) at the Childcare Learning Centers to develop and practice the five key emotional skills that are taught through Preschool RULER: recognizing emotions, understanding emotions, labeling emotions, expressing emotions, and regulating emotions. The Mood Meter provides a color-based language that children and adults can use to discuss emotions by dividing emotions into four quadrants based on pleasantness and energy. We discussed the different ways the Mood Meter is being used at the Childcare Learning Centers and how it can be used at home to promote emotional self-awareness and to develop a feeling words vocabulary. Importantly, we discussed the value of coordinated, collaborative efforts by adults at school and at home to promote the social and emotional skills development of young children.

A key focus of our parent discussion groups was on building partnerships and collaboration between families, schools, and communities. We asked parents about the channels of communication between home and school and how schools can best support families. We also asked parents how they would like to receive information from schools (e.g., online, through workshops, etc.) and what the best time of day was for in-person meetings. Parents also shared information regarding the types of

resources that would be helpful, as well as specific topic areas that they would like more information about. Together, parents discussed avenues through which families and schools could work together to form collaborative partnerships that jointly support child skill development.

Discovery Community Leader Discussion Group

To begin our final discussion group with Discovery Community leaders, we shared the learning that occurred during our parent discussion groups. We discussed the content that was covered; the needs that parents' communicated related to their own and their children's social and emotional skill development; the school-based support that parents are seeking; and larger parent engagement challenges, such as successfully accessing families.

During the course of the discussion group, the Discovery Community Leaders responded to the experiences uncovered in the parent discussions and made connections to work they have been engaged in with families in their communities. An important focus of our discussion was on specific strategies for accessing and engaging more families. These strategies are critical given that they are the vehicles through which to effectively extend a shared language regarding social and emotional development in early childhood. In addition, we discussed topics for future family workshops that are geared toward supporting families in their ability to promote social and emotional skill development in early childhood. We ended the discussion group by discussing the need for individuals and groups engaged in efforts to promote collaboration between home, schools, and communities to have regular opportunities to network, support one another, and engage in information sharing.

Results and Discussion

Parent Discussion Groups

Parents as Powerful Influences

Throughout the discussion groups with parents we discussed how parents play critical roles in their children's development of social and emotional skills. As a group, we discussed the importance of parents talking to their children about how they feel, why they feel the way they do, and how they can manage difficult feelings. Parents are a key source of information for preschoolers who are carefully observing the language and strategies their parents use to manage their emotions. Indeed, research has shown that family members affect children's development of emotion skills through a number of mechanisms, including observational learning, modeling, and social referencing (Morris, et al., 2007). Many parents shared their experiences of having noticed their children "picking up" on their emotional

cues. Parents noted the effects their children's emotions have on them – clearly demonstrating the interconnectedness of parent and child emotions.

During the group discussion, we also emphasized how important it is for parents to provide support and guidance to their children during early childhood, as children are just beginning to develop critical social and emotional skills. Parents who had multiple children talked about the benefits of "starting early" and how they had observed positive outcomes associated with helping their children develop key skills at a young age.

Importance of Parents Taking Care of Themselves

The discussion groups provided parents with the opportunity to share their strategies for managing unpleasant feelings and also to hear about each other's experiences. Parents provided a number of examples of regulation strategies, including taking time by themselves, calling family members, and exercising. Throughout the conversation, it was evident that there were common parenting challenges with which parents had been struggling. Parents offered suggestions and advice to one another and began to jointly problem-solve around specific issues and challenges that were brought up. As parents supported one another we highlighted the importance of self-care. For example, we discussed that parents will not be in a position to help and support their children until they help themselves and ensure that their own needs are met. We specifically discussed the importance of parents having an emotional self-awareness, knowledge of their own emotional triggers, and an understanding of how to successfully manage their own feelings so that they are in a position to help their children.

Positive Impact of Preschool RULER

Parents whose children attend the Childcare Learning Centers were familiar with the Mood Meter. They told us that their children had come home from school and were teaching their fathers, siblings, and other family members the significance of each color on the Mood Meter (e.g., yellow is for happy feelings, blue is for sad feelings). Parents indicated that the Mood Meter has provided an accessible language for their young children to talk about feelings. They also noted that they enjoy "checking in" on Mood Meters hanging outside of their children's classrooms when they drop their children off in the morning. By using the Mood Meter to "check in" on how they are feeling, children and parents have a daily opportunity to share how they are feeling, why they might be feeling that way, and what they can do if they want to feel a different way. These reports were encouraging considering research that suggests social and emotional skill development programs that will have lasting effects are

more likely to be those that extend beyond schools to involve parents/caregivers and communities (Bierman & Erath, 2006; Powell, 2006). Importantly, by using the Mood Meter with their children, parents are collaborating with their children's teachers in their efforts to support social and emotional skill development.

The participating parents whose children did not attend the Childcare Learning Center were excited to learn about the Mood Meter and eager to teach it to their children and use it in their homes. We shared how the Mood Meter is being used in preschool classrooms and how young children have quickly picked up the color-based language and have been using it in their classrooms and teaching family members at home.

Building Home-School Partnerships

When discussing building home-school partnerships and collaboration between families, schools, and communities, parents noted how important it was to be able to support the learning that occurs at school. Parents wanted the information and guidance needed to effectively build upon the social and emotional learning that takes place during the school day. They also added that they are especially interested in hearing from teachers about their children's progress in the development of social and emotional skills. Accordingly, many parents stressed the importance of on-going, regular communication between parents and teachers. Relationships between teachers and caregivers affect parents' likelihood of becoming involved with their child's school (Knopf & Swick, 2007), which highlights the importance of forming strong, positive relationships that encourage two-way communication between families and educators. We discussed how high quality relationships are essential for effective collaboration between families, schools, and communities.

When asked about their preferred format for home-school correspondence, responses varied from parent to parent as handouts, emails, and in-person meetings were each identified as preferred means of communicating information. Similarly, parents' preferred meeting times for workshops also varied depending on work schedules or other conflicting commitments. For schools to promote collaboration effectively with family and community members, it will be important that their engagement efforts take multiple forms that adequately consider the diverse needs of the families in their communities.

Lastly, when asked about additional topics that they would be interested in discussing, parents reported that they would like to learn more about handling transitions, separation, and issues between siblings. Parents communicated similar challenges in these areas and expressed interest in getting

resources and support. They were interested especially in learning practical tips that they could immediately try out in their homes.

Discovery Community Discussion Group

Successfully Accessing Families

Successfully accessing a large and diverse group of parents was identified as critical to extending a shared language regarding social and emotional development across the state. While an on-going challenge for providers engaged in family-focused work, Discovery Community leaders shared a number of family engagement strategies that had been successful in the past. These strategies included holding family events at local children's museums (e.g., Stepping Stones); offering giveaways (e.g., door prizes, gift cards, books); tying parent events to child performances at schools; and linking up with existing family resource centers and play groups. An additional strategy included providing translation services for culturally and linguistically diverse families. This strategy is especially important given the increasing number of children attending preschool who are dual language learners and living in households where English is not the primary language spoken (Castro, 2011). Moreover, it reflects an awareness and consideration of the diverse needs of families. It is critical that family engagement efforts appropriately consider the needs and experiences of all parents, including those from low-income backgrounds and those with primary languages other than English who may experience barriers to traditional forms of parent engagement in school (Vazquez-Nuttall, Li, & Kaplan, 2006).

Ideas for Future Parent Workshops

When discussing ideas for future parent workshops, the Discovery Community leaders identified the need for specific father-focused engagement efforts, as well as the need to support parents in their efforts to send united parenting messages between partners. We also discussed the importance of incorporating into workshops why social and emotional development in early childhood is so critical – highlighting the association between well-developed social and emotional skills and other positive outcomes (e.g., academic performance, relationships, health, etc.).

Limitations

A limitation of the current study was the small sample size of parents and community members who participated in the discussion groups. Despite wide-ranging recruitment efforts (see Method section above for description), parent turnout was lower than anticipated. The parents who did participate mentioned that they were juggling busy schedules, as well as personal and professional commitments that made it challenging to participate in as many school-based functions as they would

like to participate in. These same challenges most likely applied to other parents who were ultimately unable to attend the discussion groups despite having signed up to participate. It is important to note, however, that the small group format appeared to facilitate participation and information sharing between parents. All parents were active participants who shared their experiences, contributed to the group discussion, and facilitated joint meaning making.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we engaged parents and community members in a discussion regarding the concepts and practices of social and emotional development, the importance of promoting social and emotional skill development in early childhood, and their significant roles in this development. We also began to share and extend our learning by meeting with Discovery Community leaders in various Connecticut communities. Our discussion groups provided valuable opportunities for joint information sharing, as well as hearing and learning from parents, community members, and Discovery Community leaders. We recommend that our findings be used to inform the development of processes through which educators, parents, and community members may work collaboratively to support social and emotional development in early childhood. These processes can serve to inform the parent engagement efforts of Preschool RULER, other early childhood social and emotional programs, and more generally, the efforts of early childhood educators across the state. Additionally, this research may inform future studies that replicate our design and extend our research. Developing collaborative relationships and a shared language between schools, families, and communities around social and emotional development in early childhood is a critical step towards ensuring that all children enter school with the social and emotional skills they need to be successful in kindergarten and throughout their schooling.

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