Early Literacy in Preschool: Are Social Skills Related to Reading?

Brynn Parker, M.S. Ed., Jocelyn H. Newton, PhD, NCSP
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

Abstract
Early literacy skills are related to later reading outcomes and overall reading achievement. Poor social skills are a risk factor for low academic achievement. This study explores the extent that learning-related social skills relate to early literacy skills in preschool, as well as the extent to which specific learning-related social skills relate to overall literacy. Implications for school psychologists in promoting and supporting positive student outcomes in preschool are discussed.

Background
• Early literacy skills, such as phonological awareness, vocabulary, and letter naming, develop during the first five years of life. Literacy skills attained during preschool positively predict reading in elementary school (Missall et al., 2007).
• With the increased focus on Response to Intervention (RTI) throughout schools, the use of curriculum-based measures (CBMs) for literacy assessment has been extended to the preschool population (Priest et al., 2001). CBMs are easily administered, reliable and valid, and sensitive to age and intervention effects (Prest et al., 2007).
• Researchers have examined the causes of poor academic skills and have identified a number of child, family, and cultural factors (McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). Social skills are one factor that has received less attention by the research community.
• Children’s peer relations and social competence are clearly necessary for school adjustment (Wentzel, 1991), however, few researchers have focused on specific aspects of social skills, such as learning-related social skills. Learning-related social skills are important for academic achievement, and include self-regulation and social competence (McClelland et al., 2006).
• Learning-related social skills in Kindergarten students predict reading and math skills growth between Kindergarten and Sixth grade, even after controlling for variables such as age, ethnicity, and maternal education level (McCllland et al., 2000; McClelland et al., 2006). These findings suggest that acquiring learning-related social skills early is important (McClelland et al., 2000).
• Researchers have found evidence suggesting that learning-related social skills can be present in children as young as 3 years old (McClelland & Morrison, 2003). However, there is limited research examining social skills in preschool-age populations.

Method
Participants:
• Participants of 23 preschool students provided consent for this study.
• Students came from five pre-kindergarten classrooms in three public elementary schools located in southwestern Wisconsin.

Procedure:
• Parents completed a social skills survey to report their child’s social skills in the areas of cooperation, assertion, and self-control.
• Preschool teachers administered benchmark reading assessments to their students. The fall benchmark scores were obtained for the purpose of this study.

Instrumentation:
• Social Skills Improvement System, Parent Form (SSIS) (Gresham & Elliot, 2008) measuring students’ social skills.
• Letter Identification Curriculum-Based Measurement measuring students’ early literacy skills, including their identification of upper and lowercase letters.
• In addition, parents completed a questionnaire regarding demographic information such as age, time in preschool, ethnicity, and mother’s level of education. The questionnaire also included two qualitative questions on parents’ perception of early literacy and social skills.

Results
Descriptive Statistics
• Participants’ time in preschool ranged from 2-30 months.
• Participants ranged in age from 4-5 years old.

Conclusions
• One study found a link between social skills and emergent literacy in preschoolers, but it did not directly examine learning-related social skills (Doctrorff, Greer, & Arnold, 2008). Further, much of the research has measured early literacy through standardized assessments and has not included the use of a curriculum-based measure (Doctrorff et al., 2006; McClelland et al., 2000; McClelland et al., 2006).

Discussion
• To fully investigate the relationship between learning-related social skills and early literacy development at the preschool level, future research should include larger sample sizes. In the current study this was a likely limitation which may have impacted lack of significant results.
• Many parents indicated time spent reading to their child was an important factor contributing to their child’s reading development.
• This suggests that school psychologists can positively impact families with preschoolers by encouraging and supporting reading at home.
• Additionally, an overwhelming majority of parents indicated that social skills are important to their child’s educational success.

References