

Social-Emotional Skills in Preschool Education in the State of Connecticut: Current Practice and Implications for Child Development

Shauna Tominey, PhD, and Susan E. Rivers, PhD
Health, Emotion, and Behavior Laboratory
Department of Psychology
Yale University

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Correspondence can be addressed to Dr. Rivers at susan.rivers@yale.edu.

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Executive Summary

Developing strong social-emotional skills in early childhood is critical for school readiness and academic success. Using the state of Connecticut as a case study, we examined the inclusion of social-emotional development across various types of early childhood education and care programs, including center- and home-based programs that are licensed, accredited, or partnered with Head Start. Specifically, we examine the inclusion of social-emotional development in teacher education and training, program standards, and the assessment of children’s social-emotional skills. The analysis shows that the inclusion of social-emotional development in early childhood education programs in Connecticut is dependent up on the setting (center versus family childcare home), yet even within settings there is great variability. Key recommendations for improving the current state of social-emotional learning in Connecticut in order to help all children enter school with the social-emotional skills they need to be ready to learn include: 1) increasing educational opportunities for teachers that specifically address how to promote social-emotional skills for children and teachers, 2) increasing the number of NAEYC accredited centers, 3) developing a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), and 4) developing a protocol for assessment and follow-up.

Overview of Case Study

Participation in high-quality early education programs can have significant and lasting positive impacts on children's social and academic lives.¹⁻³ However, in the United States, there is currently no universal standard for early childhood education and care programs. Early childhood programs are offered across a range of settings (e.g., nonprofit centers, for-profit centers, family childcare homes) and even within these settings, programs differ drastically.⁴ The lack of continuity across programs in relation to teacher education and training, curricula, and child assessments makes an examination of how early childhood programs address the children's social-emotional development especially challenging.

In the state of Connecticut, there are three primary agencies that oversee regulations relating to the quality of care provided by centers and family childcare homes. These agencies include: 1) the Connecticut Department of Health, which oversees the state licensing process, 2) the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which oversees a national accreditation process, and 3) the Head Start program, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In this case study, we examine the written standards and mandates of these agencies with the goal of identifying how children's social-emotional skills are promoted prior to kindergarten entry in the context of teacher education and training, program standards and curriculum, and child assessment.

Background

Although parents face a wide array of early childhood education and care options prior to children's entry into kindergarten, not all programs offer the same quality of care. Programs designed to meet the early care needs of families with young children are highly diverse and range drastically in quality and thus may not effectively address children's academic, social, and emotional needs.⁴ Indeed, evidence suggests that early childhood education programs may not be effectively promoting social-emotional skills.⁶ Children who develop strong social-emotional skills in preschool are better prepared for the transition to kindergarten and have significantly higher academic outcomes than their peers who struggle with these skills.^{7,8} Indeed, the preschool years are a period of significant social growth for children.⁹ The inclusion of social-emotional skills in early childhood curricula has been identified as a characteristic of high-quality early childhood education programs,¹⁰ however, preschool teachers report that they often feel unprepared to handle children's challenging behaviors, typically linked to less developed social-emotional skills in the classroom.¹¹ The rate of preschool expulsions is higher than the

rate of expulsion in all other grade levels combined (kindergarten through twelfth grade),¹² providing additional evidence of the struggles preschool teachers face with social-emotional difficulties in the classroom. Moreover, teachers are reporting that even after attending preschool, many children are entering kindergarten with deficits in social-emotional skills.⁷

Social-Emotional Skills and Academic Success

Under the umbrella term **social-emotional skills** is a composite of related skills including self-regulation and social competence.⁸ Self-regulation refers to the ability to control consciously one's thoughts and actions and can be further broken down into emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components, such as having the ability to understand and regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.^{13,14} Social competence refers to an individual's effectiveness in social interactions and includes communication skills and the ability to empathize with others.¹⁵ This broad definition allows for a range of interpretations that may be adopted by these agencies. This set of skills has been considered traditionally as the "nonacademic" skills that are critical for positive functioning in social and academic settings and related to academic success.

Many empirical studies show significant relationships between children's social-emotional skills and their short- and long-term academic outcomes. For example, one survey of early childhood educators, including teachers in home-based and center-based preschools as well as kindergarten teachers, identified children's abilities to pay attention, listen to instructions, and follow directions as critical for classroom success.¹⁶ These same skills, as well as teacher-rated social skills and the ability to work well in groups, also have been identified by kindergarten teachers as important across the transition to kindergarten.⁷ Among low-income families, preschool-aged children who demonstrated low levels of behavior problems and positive approaches to learning (e.g., strong attention abilities) scored higher than their peers on academic measures (e.g., math).⁸ Numerous studies also have found significant relationships between children's behavioral regulation skills in preschool (i.e., attention, memory, and inhibitory control) and academic achievement in reading and math in preschool and elementary school.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Moreover, the ability to regulate emotions in preschool and elementary school predicts classroom productivity and academic scores in literacy and math, even after controlling for IQ²⁰ and family background.²¹ Finally, children's effectiveness in social interactions (i.e., their social competence)¹⁵ is related significantly to their motivation and engagement in school²² and their academic achievement.^{15,23,24}

How Do Social-Emotional Skills Develop?

Two early influences on children's social-emotional development are parenting processes and their socio-economic status. Early influences set the stage for the development of social-emotional skills outside of the home and lay the foundation for the formation of relationships with teachers and peers.²⁵

Parenting Practices

Processes within the home that influence social-emotional development are reflected in parenting practices and the attachment relationship between the parent or caregiver and the child.^{15,26,27} An authoritative parenting style, which is characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and developmentally appropriate limit-setting and granting of autonomy,²⁸ has been shown to predict secure attachment and positive social-emotional development.²⁸⁻³⁰ In contrast, children of parents who use an authoritarian parenting style, which is characterized by high demandingness and low responsiveness, are more likely to have deficits in social-emotional skills.^{31,32}

Family Socio-Economic Status

Children from low-income families are more likely than their peers to enter school with deficits in social-emotional skills.^{33,34} For example, compared to their more advantaged peers, children from low-income families have more difficulties paying attention,³⁵ poorer regulatory abilities,³⁴ are less socially competent,³⁶ and exhibit more internalizing and externalizing behaviors.³⁷ Children living in poverty are exposed to an accumulation of stressors and risk factors (e.g., parent stress, family turmoil, chronic illness, dangerous neighborhoods) that can have lasting detrimental effects on their social-emotional well-being.^{33,36} In addition to having fewer financial and academic resources, children from low-income families are less likely than their peers to experience parenting processes and parenting styles that promote positive social-emotional development.^{27,33} For example, in comparison to parents with higher socioeconomic status, parents living in poverty spend less quality time with their children, are less responsive, and provide less social support.³⁶ They are also more likely to use an authoritarian parenting style and punitive forms of discipline.^{33,38,39} Research documents that these parenting techniques render children less prepared than their peers to appropriately navigate social environments.^{31,32}

The connections between poverty and poor social-emotional outcomes are especially troubling in the current economic climate. In recent years in the United States, unemployment has been on the rise with rates increasing from 4.6% in 2007 to 9.2% in 2011.⁴⁰ As unemployment has risen, so has the number of children and families living in poverty. The national poverty rate increased from 14.3% in

2009 to 15.3% in 2010.⁴¹ These rates were even higher for families with children; in 2010, more than one in five children (21.6%) between the ages of 0-17 were living in poverty.⁴¹

Why is the Preschool Experience Important for Social-Emotional Development?

The discrepancy in children's social-emotional skills that is linked to family socioeconomic status highlights the importance of having access to preschool programs that effectively promote these skills, ensuring that all children enter kindergarten with the social-emotional skills critical for academic success. More than 80% of children in the U.S. attend early childhood education and care programs prior to kindergarten entry,⁴² making preschool an important setting for the development of social-emotional skills. For most children, the preschool classroom is the first environment outside of the family in which they are asked to demonstrate social-emotional skills.⁴³ It is also during the preschool years that children experience a number of developmental changes, including significant language development⁴⁴ and significant brain development in the prefrontal cortex,¹⁴ both of which are related to components of social-emotional development, including communication skills, emotion understanding, self-regulation, and social competence.^{14,44} The high number of children attending preschool coupled with the significant developmental growth that happens during this period point to preschool as an ideal setting for promoting children's social-emotional skills.

Research suggests that, on the whole, preschool programs are not sufficiently developing the social-emotional skills that children need for the transition to kindergarten and academic success in elementary school due to the wide range in quality across programs.^{4,45} Three factors, depicted in Figure 1, emerge as critical to developing children's social-emotional skills in preschool: 1) teacher education and training, 2) relevant curriculum, and 3) assessment strategies.

Teacher Education and Training

The educational tracts available for preschool teachers are diverse and generally not well-regulated which contributes to the range in quality of preschool programs.⁴ Unlike the requirements for those teaching at the primary and secondary school levels, the requirements for preschool teachers

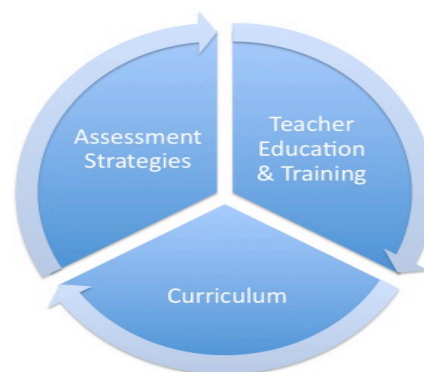


Figure 1. Three factors in preschool programming that are critical to developing children's social-emotional skills.

vary widely depending on setting. There is no formal “career ladder” to become an early childhood education teacher, but rather a “career lattice” with numerous entry and end points.⁴⁶ For example, early childhood educators may have 1) a high school diploma or its equivalent with little to no formal training in early childhood education, or 2) a master’s degree in early childhood education in combination with extensive experience working with children.

Although some studies have found positive relationships between teacher education level and preschool program quality,¹¹ others have found null or contradictory relationships.⁴⁷ None of these studies specifically examined the inclusion of social-emotional development in teacher education and training programs or the effects of teacher education on children’s social-emotional development in the classroom. However, research suggests that in order to help children develop social-emotional skills, teachers themselves need to have strong social-emotional skills.⁶ Because of the numerous educational pathways for early childhood educators, it seems likely that the exposure that preschool teachers have to systematic approaches for social-emotional skill development is highly dependent on each teacher’s education level, their experiences related to working with children, and where they are working (i.e., whether or not the preschool offers professional development or has a social-emotional curriculum in place).

Social-Emotional Curricula

To be considered high-quality environments for developing children’s social-emotional skills, preschools should incorporate social-emotional development into their curriculum, and also ensure that teachers receive training on how to improve and enhance children’s social-emotional skills.¹⁰ Curricula that most effectively develop children’s social-emotional skills are those that include: direct instruction and skill modeling, numerous opportunities for children to practice using their social-emotional skills, opportunities to generalize these skills to naturalistic settings, and feedback.⁹

Assessment Practices

High-quality preschools also should have in place assessment practices in order to track children’s development related to these skills.⁴⁸ Because social-emotional skills play an important role in children’s school readiness, assessments focused on children’s social-emotional development should be an integral part of preschool curricula. These assessments can be used to: 1) gain an understanding of a child’s overall social-emotional development, 2) identify curricula and teaching practices that are most effective at promoting social-emotional development, and 3) identify children who are struggling with social-emotional difficulties and who may need additional support.^{48,49} In order to provide an accurate

measure of children’s social-emotional skills, best practices advise teachers to use multiple approaches to assessment and include communication from family members.⁵⁰

What is the State of Early Childhood Education in Connecticut?

According to the most recent available statistics, from March 2011, there were 212,504 children under 5 years old in Connecticut, representing 6% of the state population. Nearly 14% (29,379) of these children were living in poverty and more than 80% reported attending early care programs before kindergarten.⁵¹ There were licensed childcare slots available for 56% of these children. Of the 119,444 slots, 80.0% were in centers, 19.6% were small family childcare home slots, and less than 1% were large family childcare home slots.⁵² There were only licensed slots available for just over half the children, but there are reports that 80% of children receive care outside of the home. Thus, as many as 24% or 51,000 children receive care from unlicensed providers or from a friend, family member, or neighbor.

Licensed childcare slots were available across a total of 2,152 licensed childcare centers and 2,678 family childcare homes. Approximately 25% of these centers were NAEYC accredited and 0.1% of the family childcare homes were accredited.⁵¹ In 2011, there were approximately 100 centers (4.6% of total centers) in Connecticut that offered Head Start funded slots to children from low-income families.⁵³ In 2009, the School Readiness program provided \$73,991,933 for childcare slots for low-income families in Connecticut. This dollar amount is equivalent to fulltime slots for 8,865 children.⁵ Centers were staffed by approximately 14,410 childcare providers and family childcare homes were staffed by approximately 6,281 providers.⁵¹ Figure 2 represents estimated number of childcare slots in 2011 in Connecticut and their regulating agencies. The number of childcare slots that are under regulations in addition to licensing is likely overestimated as the total number does not account for slots overlapping in their classification (e.g., slots that are partnered with Head Start in NAEYC accredited centers).

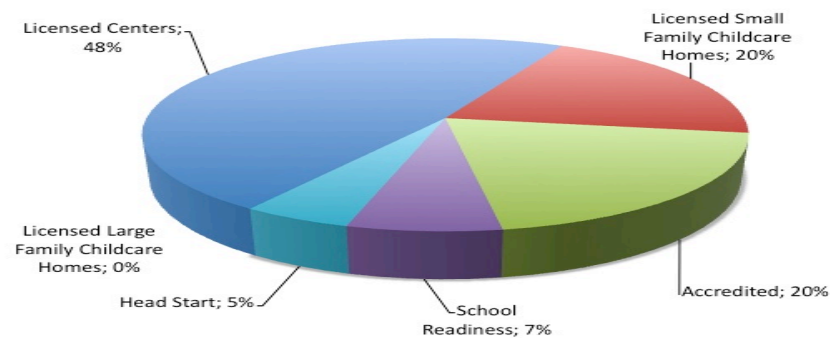


Figure 2. Estimated licensed childcare slots in Connecticut (2011).

Case Study

The primary research question driving this case study was: *How is the development of social-emotional skills currently included in preschool education standards in the state of Connecticut?* More specifically, how is the development of children's social-emotional skills addressed by 1) teacher education and training programs, 2) program standards and curricula, and 3) child assessment practices?

Method

To answer these questions we examined the regulations articulated by each of the three primary regulating agencies in early childhood education in Connecticut: the Connecticut Department of Health (licensing), NAEYC (accreditation), and the Head Start program. A regulator specific to the state of Connecticut is the School Readiness Program. Funded by the Connecticut Department of Education and the Department of Social Services, this initiative aims to increase the number of high-quality childcare slots available to low-income families.⁵ In order for programs to receive funding through School Readiness grants, they must be either NAEYC accredited or partnered with Head Start and thus meet the requirements of those regulating agencies. In our analysis, we present information regarding the number of childcare slots funded by the School Readiness Program, but do not discuss the School Readiness Program as a separate regulating agency. It is the regulations specified by the state licensing process, the NAEYC accreditation process, and the Head Start program that will be the foundation of our investigation.

Procedure

We examined the written regulations of the Connecticut Department of Health for licensing information, the NAEYC for accreditation information, and the Head Start program. The vast majority of this information was readily available in online reports or through each agency's website. When information was not available or questions remained unanswered, we contacted the agencies directly.

Descriptions of Agencies

Licensing: Connecticut Department of Public Health

Licensing for home-based and center-based preschool programs is managed through each state's Department of Public Health. In Connecticut, all centers and home childcare providers that meet the following criteria must be licensed: 1) child day care centers that provide care outside of children's home to 12 or more related or unrelated children on a regular basis, 2) group day care homes that

provide supplemental care for 7 to 12 related or unrelated children on a regular basis or, 3) family day care homes which provide care for 6 or fewer children (including the providers own children) for between 3 to 12 hours per day on a regular basis.⁵⁴ The Department requires that licenses be renewed every 4 years.

Accreditation: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

NAEYC oversees a voluntary accreditation process for early childhood programs. Programs interested in pursuing NAEYC accreditation must be licensed, in operation for at least one year, and provide care for 10 or more children between birth and kindergarten ages. As part of the application process, programs undergo a rigorous self-study process through which they strive to meet and maintain NAEYC program standards and guidelines.⁵⁵ To earn NAEYC accreditation, programs must successfully meet the agency's requirements for teacher education and training. Programs also need to be observed by NAEYC early childhood professionals and demonstrate that they meet a specified level of the agency's Early Childhood Program Standards. NAEYC accreditation must be renewed every five years.

Head Start

The Head Start program grants funds to licensed public and private, non-profit and for-profit, center- and home-based programs. These funds allow providers to offer half- or full-day comprehensive early childhood education services at no cost to children from low-income families.⁵⁶ Preschool programs partnering with Head Start must meet Head Start's performance standards, which include requirements for teacher education and training, curricula standards, and child assessments.

Results

Inclusion of Social-Emotional Content in Teacher Education and Training

Licensing Requirements for Teacher Education and Training

There are few educational requirements to become a licensed provider. In centers, directors and head teachers are required to have a Child Development Associates degree (CDA). Classroom teachers are required to have a minimum education level of a high school diploma or GED but there are no educational requirements for assistant teachers. Directors and teachers at each level are required to attend ongoing training equivalent to 1% of their hours worked per year. For a full-time teacher working 40 hours per week 50 weeks per year, which is equivalent to 20 hours of continuing education hours per year. Providers in large family childcare homes are required to have some experience working with

children along with a high school diploma or GED and are required to attend ongoing training equivalent to 1% of their hours worked per year.⁵⁷ There are no educational requirements or ongoing training requirements for providers in small family childcare homes.⁵⁸

NAEYC Accreditation Requirements for Teacher Education and Training

NAEYC requires that 75% of head teachers must meet one of the following educational requirements: 1) have a CDA, 2) be working toward an associates or higher degree in early childhood education (ECE) or a related field, 3) have a degree outside of field with 3 years experience in accredited programs, or 4) have a degree outside of the field with 3 years experience in non-accredited programs plus 30 hours of training in past year. Additionally, NAEYC requires that 50% of assistant teachers must meet one of the following educational requirements: 1) have a CDA, 2) be working toward a CDA, or 3) meet one of the head teacher requirements.⁵⁹

Head Start Requirements Teacher Education and Training

Requirements for Head Start specify that each classroom has a teacher with: 1) an associate's or bachelor's degree in ECE, 2) an associate's or bachelor's degree in related field plus coursework equivalent to a major in ECE and teaching experience with preschool children, 3) a bachelor's or advanced degree in any field with coursework equivalent to a major in ECE and teaching experience with preschool children, or 4) a bachelor's degree in any field with admission into Teach for America, a passing score on a rigorous teaching exam (e.g., Praxis II), and participation in Teach for America summer training program⁶⁰

Social-Emotional Development in Program Curricula

Licensing Requirements for Program Curricula

There are no licensing requirements for the inclusion of social-emotional development in curricula for family childcare homes. There is language in the "Statutes and Regulations for Child Day Care Centers" stating that centers must have a "plan" that includes "experiences that promote self-reliance and build self-esteem." There does not appear to be any procedure in place for evaluating this required plan.⁵⁷

NAEYC Accreditation Requirements for Program Curricula

NAEYC includes social-emotional development in their five primary curriculum areas.⁶⁹ This organization places extensive requirements on programs, including observations of the social-emotional

climate of the classroom and teacher-student interactions. These requirements are reviewed every 3 years in a self-study process as well as through classroom observation.⁷⁰

Head Start Requirements for Program Curricula

Similar to the NAEYC accreditation requirements, the Head Start curriculum discusses extensively the importance of children’s social-emotional development. Specifically, the Head Start Performance Standards state that programs must support children’s social and emotional development through “building trust, fostering independence, encouraging self-control, encouraging respect for the feelings and rights of others, and supporting and respecting the home language, culture, and family composition of each child in ways that support the child’s health and well-being.”⁷¹

Assessment of Social-Emotional Skills

Licensing Requirements for Assessment

There are no licensing requirements related to child assessments for family childcare homes or centers.^{57,58}

NAEYC Accreditation Requirements for Assessment

NAEYC does not require specific assessments to be used, but does require programs to implement ongoing and systematic assessments of children’s progress. Assessments must involve families, use a combination of observation and developmentally-appropriate assessments, and ensure follow-up to assessment in all domains of development (including social-emotional development).⁶⁹ The intention of the assessments is to help teachers tailor curricula to meet children’s needs as well as to identify children who may benefit from “more intensive instruction or intervention.”⁶⁹

Head Start Requirements for Assessment

Head Start has a three-step process for assessing children. The first step is that all children enrolled in Head Start undergo screenings, including health, speech, hearing, and vision screenings. The second step specifies that staff conduct on-going developmental assessments, including assessment of social emotional skills (e.g., attention skills, self-help skills, social and receptive skills). The third step is formal evaluation for children identified as needing additional services. Teachers assess children three times per year. Use of specific assessments is not specified by Head Start regulations, however, trained personnel must administer the assessments and a multidisciplinary team that includes teachers and specialists must make evaluations.⁷³

Discussion

In this case study, we examined the inclusion of social-emotional skill development in preschool programs within Connecticut. Specifically, we examined regulations related to the inclusion of social-emotional development in teacher education and training, program curricula, and child assessments as specified by three primary regulating agencies of early childhood education programs. Consistent with research literature, our results revealed that regulations for preschool programs in Connecticut are highly varied as a function of the type and setting of the program,⁴ leading to a range in requirements related to social-emotional development.

Social-Emotional Development and Teacher Education and Training

In Connecticut, licensing regulations place a greater emphasis on teacher education in centers than in family childcare homes.⁵⁷ Additionally, because centers are more likely than family childcare homes to seek and obtain NAEYC accreditation or to be partnered with Head Start, centers may have additional regulations dictating the minimum requirements for teacher education level. Licensing also requires ongoing training and education hours for center providers and for providers in large family childcare homes, within which there are very few slots available. These are not requirements for providers in small family childcare homes. The lack of educational requirements for family childcare providers and the barriers preventing these providers from participating in opportunities to receive ongoing trainings and education are problematic, especially with the high number of family childcare providers providing care for preschool children before school entry. Typically, the adult in a family childcare home is the sole provider for a group of children. Finding a skilled substitute to fill in so that the provider can attend trainings or workshops often is not feasible. Moreover, family childcare providers do not have the opportunity to observe other classrooms/homes nor do they typically network with other professionals.

It was beyond the scope of this study to observe how teacher education level translates to practice in the classroom. Nevertheless, the educational content of CDA programs and early childhood education degree programs indicates that providers with higher levels of education will have more exposure to material promoting the importance of social-emotional development than will providers without formal education.^{61,63} CDA programs require approximately 10 hours of training that specifically includes social-emotional development (Goal III: To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance).⁶¹ Four-year degrees in early childhood education have required and

recommended courses that include social-emotional development components, including: 1) Introduction to Programs for Young Children and Laboratory, 2) Infant and Toddler Development, 3) Early and Middle Childhood Development, 4) Observing Infants and Toddlers or Observing Early Childhood, 5) Child Development Laboratory: Fieldwork Practicum, and 6) Child Development Laboratory: Supervised Teaching Practicum.⁶³ Even if teachers believe that social-emotional development is a critical component of preschool education, it is not clear from our investigation if teachers have the skills they need to promote effectively these skills in the classroom and to manage problem behaviors. In fact, research indicates that these may be areas in which preschool teachers, even those with advanced degrees, do have significant struggles.⁷⁴ Additionally, we found no evidence of coursework aimed at promoting teachers' social-emotional skills, the development of which is important for teachers to be able to effectively model and promote these skills in children.⁶

Opportunities for Continuing Education and Training in Connecticut

Continuing education and training hours can include college courses, in-service trainings, workshops, or conference presentations related to early childhood education. Additionally, these hours can include job-related trainings, such as first aid courses. Numerous agencies around the state of Connecticut offer opportunities for continuing education and training for early childhood providers. For example, 2-1-1 Childcare provides trainings and workshops to early childhood providers.⁶⁴ Specifically, 2-1-1 offers two trainings related to social-emotional development on request: 1) "Guiding Behavior" (also offered to parents), and 2) "Conflict Resolution." The trainings focus on helping educators and parents to promote aspects of children's social-emotional development and they are offered throughout the year by request. 2-1-1 has no follow-up or evaluation of training effectiveness (V. Grant, personal communication, September 29, 2011).

All Our Kin is another Connecticut-based agency that provides training in the form of workshops (both one-time workshops and workshops in a series) for family childcare home providers. Several of the workshops relate to children's social-emotional development. In 2011, All Our Kin held 45 trainings sessions across the state with an average attendance of 14 providers per session. They also offer support through site visits and direct instruction (J. Wagner, personal communication, September 23, 2011).

There are numerous other agencies that offer trainings and workshops, including information on social-emotional development to early childhood providers. For example, the Early Care and Education

Training Institute offers support and training to parents and providers, including CDA training programs, on-site coaching, and workshops and seminars on components of social-emotional development including positive behavior management strategies.⁶⁵ There are also 63 Family Resource Centers across the state of Connecticut, which provide support in the form of trainings to family day care providers including trainings related to social-emotional development and discipline and guidance.⁶⁶ And finally, the Connecticut Association for the Education of Young Children holds an annual conference featuring presentations from professionals in the field of early childhood education, administrators, teachers, and students.⁶⁷

Connecticut Charts-a-Course offers a statewide training program (Training Program in Child Development) for early childhood providers who have no previous college credit. The program is intended to provide workshops covering the core areas of knowledge specified by the CDA in order to increase the number of early childhood providers with this credential.⁶⁸

Social-Emotional Development and Program Curricula

Although licensing regulations related to curricula include mention of aspects of social-emotional development, Head Start programs and NAEYC accredited programs (and thus programs receiving Connecticut School Readiness funds) are the only programs with detailed curricular standards related to social-emotional development. These standards, however, do not provide teachers with specific lesson plans, activities, or approaches to promoting social-emotional development in the classroom. Thus, it seems likely that the effectiveness of teachers at integrating social-emotional skill development into the classroom environment and curriculum is highly dependent on their education and training. NAEYC has a system in place for reviewing how their curriculum standards for social-emotional development translate to classroom practice, but none of the other programs do.

Unifying Early Childhood Curricula in Connecticut

The Connecticut State Department of Education has made an attempt to unify the aims of preschool curricula by publishing and posting online free of charge a Preschool Curriculum Framework to guide the development of early childhood programs.⁷² This curriculum addresses four domains of development, one of which is “personal and social development.” This domain includes content standards, which include goals that children should reach by the end of preschool as well as program goals. Each of these content standards is broken down into performance standards/indicators with specific examples of how each content standard would look in a preschool classroom. For example, one

of the content standards is “demonstrate awareness of one’s own and others’ feelings.” The performance standard that accompanies this goal is: use words to express emotions or feelings. One of the related program goals is “*Preschool programs will provide children with opportunities to use age-appropriate conflict-resolution strategies.*” The performance standards that accompany this goal are: Educational experiences will assure that preschool children will: use words to identify the conflict; engage in developing solutions and work to resolve conflicts; and seek adult help when involved in a conflict. It is unknown how the state is making providers aware of this resource and whether or not teachers are using it or in what way (W. Gilliam, personal communication, September 2011).

Social-Emotional Development and Child Assessment

There are no licensing requirements related to assessing children’s social-emotional development or any other domains of development.^{57,58} NAEYC accredited programs and Head Start programs have regular assessments (including assessments of social-emotional development) in place along with plans for follow-up, but these programs make up a modest percentage of childcare programs across the state. Anecdotal evidence indicates that family childcare providers rely largely on instinct and experience, rather than formal assessments to determine when to seek out additional support for children’s challenging behaviors (J. Wagner, personal communication, September 23, 2011). An attitude often observed in family childcare homes is that, “Something is wrong and I’m going to figure it out.” Agencies such as All Our Kin provide family childcare providers with resources and referrals for additional support, but the extent to which family childcare providers seek out this support is highly dependent upon each individual provider.

Resources for Assessment and Follow-Up in Connecticut

Connecticut has several agencies that provide assessment support to early childhood centers and family childcare homes. For example, 2-1-1, Connecticut’s resource and referral agency, refers providers who have specific child behavior questions to their 211 Development Infoline. Early childhood professionals who participate in ongoing trainings staff the Infoline. Another resource available to early childhood educators is the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP), which provides mental health consultation and support for families and educators to support healthy social-emotional development of children ages 0 to 5 years. Services include phone consultation, center-based consultation, and child-specific consultation. The center-based consultations are very in-depth; consultants observe programs and help develop and implement plans, both for individual children and classrooms.

Limitations

There are two primary limitations to the present study that need to be noted. First, the findings reported herein relied almost entirely on information gathered from online sources, including agency reports and websites. Although we obtained a wealth of information related to regulations in early childhood education, we were not able to observe how these regulations translate into practice in classroom settings. For example, although Head Start program standards stress the importance of social-emotional development, we do not know how teachers are using that information to promote social-emotional skills in the classroom, if teacher education or experience impacts their ability to effectively promote social-emotional development, or how effectiveness is being assessed. In order to gain a better understanding of how regulations regarding social-emotional development translate to practice, future investigations should include multiple methods for assessing the inclusion of social-emotional development in preschool classrooms, including the use of teacher surveys and classroom observations.

Second, the scope of the study was limited to regulations specified by three primary regulators of early childhood education. In addition to these regulators, there are countless program-specific standards and curricula that may dictate the inclusion of social-emotional development in licensed centers that are not accredited by NAEYC or partnered with Head Start. These programs may be of very high quality and have methods of effectively promoting and assessing children's social-emotional development, although it is important to note that there is no external party involved in monitoring quality.

Recommendations

Findings from the present study revealed that, similar to many aspects of early childhood education and care in the U.S., the inclusion of social-emotional development in preschool programs is highly varied. There are currently no universal standards for including social-emotional development in early childhood education in either the Connecticut or the U.S. Moreover, there is no system in place to evaluate the extent to which programs that do include social-emotional development are effectively developing these skills in preschool children. To raise the overall quality of early childhood education in Connecticut and ensure all children enter school with the social-emotional skills necessary for school success, we recommend several steps.

Recommendation #1

Education for early childhood educators must be formally encouraged, especially in settings such as family childcare homes where providers are least likely to have formal education related to early childhood education. Currently, efforts are being made by several Connecticut-based agencies, including Connecticut Charts-a-Course and All Our Kin to bring educational opportunities to providers in centers and family childcare homes. Early childhood education also should be expanded to include curricula emphasizing specific approaches to promoting social-emotional skill development and managing problem behaviors in the classroom. The focus of CDA and higher education courses related to social-emotional development primarily focus on *typical* development. These courses help providers view social-emotional development as an important part of early learning, but may not be providing them with the tools they need to effectively promote social-emotional skills and manage problem behaviors in the classroom. Early childhood education programs should also promote the development of teacher social-emotional skills.⁶

Recommendation #2

The number of accredited childcare centers and family childcare homes should be increased. The NAEYC accreditation process requires providers to meet high standards of education and promotes curricular standards and child assessments that place a strong emphasis on social-emotional development. Additionally, this accreditation process is accompanied by a systematic review process, which includes a rigorous program of self-study and observations designed to ensure programs are meeting high quality standards.

Although important, NAEYC accreditation is time-consuming and expensive, which may deter centers and providers from entering this voluntary process. Connecticut Charts-a-Course sponsors the Accreditation Facilitation Project, a program that provides support (including financial support) for programs working toward NAEYC accreditation.⁶⁸ These efforts should be expanded to reach more centers and to include family childcare homes. NAEYC only offers accreditation to centers, however, the National Association for Family Childcare (NAFCC) offers an equivalent accreditation process for family childcare homes.⁷⁵ Currently in Connecticut, only three family childcare homes are accredited through this process.

Recommendation #3

The state of Connecticut should work toward the development of a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS; W. Gilliam, personal communication, September 2011). A QRIS is a comprehensive

approach aimed at improving the quality of early childhood education and care and includes five elements: 1) research-based standards, 2) a focus on assessment and accountability, 3) outreach and support for programs and providers, 4) financial compensation and incentives, and 5) education for parents. As of 2009, 19 states had developed and implemented a QRIS.⁷⁶ Each state currently implementing a QRIS accept NAEYC accreditation (and many accept NAFCC accreditation) as proof of program quality, another indication that accreditation should be promoted.

Recommendation #4

There is a need to develop a protocol for child assessment, evaluation, and follow-up. Ensuring that providers in centers and family childcare homes are trained in developmentally appropriate assessments and have a system in place for evaluating, obtaining services, and providing follow-up for children is an important step toward helping children receive the early intervention that they need. Additionally, providers in centers or family childcare homes need to be made aware of agencies providing support and early intervention for children who have deficits in their social-emotional skills that require intervention.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined the inclusion of social-emotional skill development in early childhood education in Connecticut. Like many aspects of preschool education in the U.S., the inclusion of social-emotional development in teacher education and training requirements, program standards and curricula, and child assessments is highly varied depending on the type of program (center-based or home-based) and whether the program is licensed, accredited, or partnered with Head Start. These results have important implications, not only for early childhood education in the state of Connecticut but also for early childhood education in the U.S. as a whole. The consistent findings between our investigation and research using national populations of children and teachers indicates that conclusions drawn from our study of Connecticut, are likely relevant to other states. Identifying ways to help teachers effectively promote social-emotional development across early childhood settings is a critical step toward ensuring that all children enter school with the social-emotional skills they need to be ready to learn in kindergarten and throughout their schooling.

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