

SOCIAL COMPETENCE AS A PRECURSOR TO INCREASED SELF-CONCEPT AND SCHOOL READINESS

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ABSTRACT

This study shows support for social competence, as a strength-based construct, as a precursor to increased self-concept or self-esteem, and increased school readiness. Since positive self-concept has been shown to be a protective factor against negative social influences, and school readiness in Kindergarten has shown to predict later academic and social success, this model demonstrates a need for more focus on social *competence in the early years*. Social competence was framed as an entirely strength-based construct called positive social competence which incorporated skills, relationships and goals. Self-concept incorporated measures of the child's expression of their accomplishments, how well the child works with peers and how well he or she describes himself or herself, and how well the child copes with correction or failure. *Finally, school readiness was an environmentally-focused construct, aimed to relate to the match between the child and the school setting*. Data resulted in a well fitting model overall with significant pathways from social competence to both outcome variables. *This study indicates that developing more programs that focus on increased social competence in the early years can help students succeed in school, and make better life choices.*

Key Words: Social competence, preschool, school readiness, self-concept, self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

The critical elements that serve as a base for learning by positively affecting children's willingness to succeed and persist in difficult situations are positive self-esteem and self-concept (Roberts, 2002). Therefore, positive self-concept may be a critical missing piece when assessing children's potential for school success. In England and Wales, guidelines for curriculum for children ages three to six include many social and emotional aspects, such as developing autonomy and the disposition to learn, positive encouragement, and constructive relationships between adults and children (QCA as cited in Roberts). This legislation specifically states, "It is crucial that settings provide the experiences and support to enable children to develop a positive sense of themselves" (QCA as cited in Roberts, p. 131). Children with increased self-concept may be less vulnerable to the negative consequences of being bullied, since these children are able to effectively generate correct assessments of self, using internal knowledge rather than allowing themselves to become diminished by other's negative assessments (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). In addition, Braverman, Meyers, & Bloomberg (1994) proposed increased self-esteem enables children to make independent decisions when pressured to use drugs.

Most schools have a system in place to assess the child's "readiness" for school, often utilizing one or more assessment instruments, typically with the focus on academic concepts. Research has shown many academic-focused screening tests to have low predictive validity for school success (Ellwein, Walsh, Eads, & Miller, 1991). These readiness tools often exclude factors such as the students' attitudes toward the school environment and their peers, and how well the student fits in their classroom setting. Pianta and La Paro (2003) discussed potential difficulties children may reveal in their early school years and made suggestions for improving early school success. The policies recommended by the researchers were developed through a careful review of research administered by the Office of Educational Research, U.S. Department of Education with support from the National Center for Early Development and Learning under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program and by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 2003) Study of Early Child Care. Across the nation, 3,500 kindergarten teachers

were asked to identify specific problems infringing on the ability of children in their classroom to make good adjustments. Also, teachers were asked to identify skills they perceived as necessary for good classroom adjustment and the scope of their concerns regarding the aforementioned problems. Alarming, 46 percent of kindergarten teachers reported that at least half of the students in their classes demonstrated deficits in their ability to follow directions. Other factors frequently mentioned include lack of academic skills, disorganized home environments, difficulty working independently, lack of formal preschool experience, difficulty working as part of a group, poor social skills, immaturity, and communication problems.

Evaluating the list above, it is clear that teachers perceive readiness as much more than some basic academic or concept skills. Promoting social competence in early childhood populations will reduce many of the problems mentioned by teachers as barriers to early school readiness. Children who are able to make friends in the classroom are more likely to have favorable perceptions of school, whereas children who are rejected by peers in the early years of school are more likely to avoid school and have lowered school performance (Ladd, 1990). Children who are able to make mutual friendships have been found to be better liked by their peers (Lindsey, 2002). In 1988, the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) circulated several suggestions for ensuring children have a successful start in their early school years (as cited in Gullo, 1994). First, all children should start school based on age, independent of what they already know. Second, ratios of teachers to children in classrooms should be low enough to allow for individualized instruction. Third, when grouping children is necessary, groups should be flexible and change frequently. Fourth, each child should be given the opportunity to progress at his or her own pace. Finally, the curriculum should be appropriate for the age and developmental level of the students. So, why are we still not caught up when it comes to measuring readiness related to actual school success? Current views suggest that readiness should be considered from an environmental standpoint. Successful transitions include readiness on the part of the child, the teacher, the school, the parents, and the community (McWayne, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2004; Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early., 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayer, 2003).

Houck (1999) examined the relationship between social competence and self-concept, evaluating the ability of social competence to predict subsequent self-concept and the ability of self-concept to predict later social competence. Results supported the former hypothesis, demonstrating a significant relationship between a child's social competence score at 12-months and their self-concept score at 24-months, as well as the child's social competence score at 24-months and their self-concept score at 36-months. However, when the variables were reversed, self-concept was unrelated to subsequent social competence. This is evidence of a temporal relationship between early social competence and later self-concept.

Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews (2001) found parents and teachers agreed that children need to be socially competent in order to be ready for school. Howes et al. (2008) found close teacher-child relationships lead to academic gains. Thus, research demonstrates readiness is an environmental construct and the responsibility of the child, the teacher, the school, the parents, and the community (McWayne, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2004; Pianta et al., 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayer, 2003). Furthermore, high social competence at only 54-months has been found to lead to higher achievement in 5th grade (Sabol & Pianta, 2012) demonstrating long-term positive outcomes. In addition, strong self-concept in the social realm has also been seen to serve as a buffer against exposure to aggression in middle school (Miller, 2013).

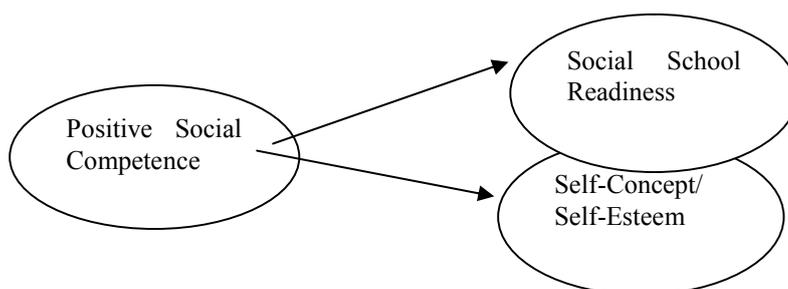


Figure 1: Three-factor Model of Positive Social Competence Related to Outcomes

This study is aimed at providing a greater understanding of social competence, and serving as a preliminary step toward larger positive social growth and overall academic success. To do this, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to evaluate a three factor-model including one exogenous variable (positive social competence) and two endogenous variables (self-concept/self-esteem and social school readiness). The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1. Each of the latent variables were comprised of three indicator variables, which are more thoroughly described in the Instruments section. Two features of this model were seen as paramount. First, Positive Social Competence indicators were chosen to align with Rose-Krasnor's pyramid (1997) because the review of the literature demonstrated that the three aspects included (skills, relationships, goals) were particularly important aspects of social competence development. Additionally, it was important to me to include social competence as an entirely strength-based construct. Therefore, I called the latent variable Positive Social Competence (PSC). The research question to be answered by this study is: Does positive social competence lead to increased social school readiness and self-concept/self-esteem for this population?

METHOD

Sample

Participants in the current study were 153 parents and children attending preschool in a large suburban preschool program in Colorado. The following demographic information was collected to better describe the sample: child's age in years and months, relationship of the respondent to the preschool child, race of the child, income level of the family, birth order of the child, whether the child receives school-based support services for a disability, and age of respondent.

Parent and family characteristics. Participants in this study were mostly parents of preschool aged children from a large preschool program in Colorado. Most of the respondents were mothers of preschool children ($n=122$). Some fathers ($n=12$), grandparents ($n=3$), or other relatives ($n=1$) of preschool aged children also participated in the study. Of the 163 surveys completed online, 25 participants did not state their relationship to the preschool child. The majority of the respondents were between 20 and 49 years of age ($n=138$). Two respondents reported being over 50 years of age, and 23 respondents did not report their age. Most of the participants had families with two children ($n=72$).

Child characteristics. For the purpose of the study, preschool children were defined as children between the ages of two and six years old. The actual sample used in the study was comprised of children in the older end of the possible distribution. One hundred and two children ages four to six years were included and forty children ages two to four were included in the study. Twenty-one participants did not provide the age of the child. Seventy-one of the children were male and 62 children were female. Seventy-three percent of the children were not receiving any special education services. Most of the children were white ($n=106$).

Procedure

Demographic information about the participants was analyzed in order to understand the sample population, descriptive statistics were calculated for each indicator to assess the characteristics of the items, reliability analysis was completed for each indicator, and some minor changes were made to the indicators in order to minimize problems later in the analysis. Specific descriptive analyses included an examination of frequencies, means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and intercorrelations of the items. Items producing low reliability estimates in relation to the rest of that scale could be excluded from subsequent analysis in order to improve the overall internal consistency for the scale. However, I made this decision on a case by case basis, since the ultimate decision to include or exclude an item considered both psychometric properties and the necessity of the item for the overall theoretical framework of the model. Next, informal Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to evaluate the basic structure of the variables. Last, the CFA for the full model, were conducted and the data was fit to the model using the maximum likelihood estimation procedure.

Instruments

A survey was developed incorporating items for three indicators for each of the three latent variables (positive social competence, social school readiness, and self-concept/self-esteem). Each of the three latent variables were comprised of three indicator variables represented by either an item or a set of items. The items were adopted, adapted or developed from existing measures chosen after a thorough review of literature. The items were selected because they best represented the theorized construct, and presented as a strength-based measure, rather than the non-occurrence of negative factors.

Positive Social Competence

Skills. In alignment with Rose-Krasnor's prism, the skills tier was assessed with four, five-point (1=*never* to 5=*always*) items representing common preschool social skills. Parents were asked to respond regarding their child's *ability* to execute the particular social skill.

Relationships and goals. The other two hypothesized factors of positive social competence were assessed with the Social Competence subscale of the Developmental Profile (Version P) (Fabes, Martin, Hanish, Anders, & Madden-Derdich, 2003) were used to measure two factors of positive social competence. The Social Competence subscale is a six-item positively worded subscale. Three items deal with relationship abilities and were hypothesized in the current study to relate to Rose-Krasnor's (1997) index level. The other three items relate to outcomes and goals and are hypothesized in the current study to represent Rose-Krasnor's theoretical level.

Social School Readiness

Initially, readiness included a child-report measure; however, initial analysis demonstrated that these items didn't align with the rest of the data and therefore, this portion of the survey was eliminated.

Fit in the school. Social school readiness, was most associated with fit in the school, which was measured by three, four-point (1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree) items corresponding to the Social Attention subscale of the BASE: Behavioral Academic Self Esteem-A rating scale (Coopersmith & Gilberts, 1982). The items were adapted to be assessed through parent report. The items included measured how well the child cooperates with others, the child's positive view of school, and their ability to talk and listen at appropriate times.

Self-Concept/ Self-Esteem

Behavioral academic self-esteem scales. Self-concept/self-esteem was assessed with seven parent-report items adapted to correspond to the Self-Confidence, Social Attraction, and Success/Failure subscales of the BASE: Behavioral Academic Self Esteem-A rating scale (Coopersmith & Gilberts, 1982). The measure was selected because the subscales align with aspects of self-concept in the preschool age group in the current literature. The Self-Confidence factor measures the child's expression of their accomplishments. The Social Attraction factor measures how well the child works with peers and how well he or she describes himself or herself. The Success/Failure factor measures how well the child copes with correction or failure. Although the BASE was developed over twenty years ago, recent use of the BASE with a population of three to five year olds demonstrated good internal consistency represented by Cronbach's Alpha's of .97 for success/failure, .85 for social attraction, and .83 for self-confidence (Warash & Markstrom, 2001). Furthermore, newer measures to assess preschool self-concept/self-esteem would be optimal, but after thorough review of available instruments, the BASE was selected because it is most closely aligned with the desired construct. Cronbach's alpha for these indicators variables for the current study were .71 for self-confidence, .79 for social attraction, and .58 for success/failure.

RESULTS

Confirmatory Factor Analyses for Each Latent Variable

CFA for Positive Social Competence. Positive Social Competence, a three-part construct based on Rose-Krasnor's (1997) prism model, including relationships and the ability to effectively interact with others, was

measured by a four-item scale of common social skills and two three item scales (representing goals and relationships) from the School Social Competence subscale of the Developmental Profile (Version P) (Fabes et al., 2003). The completely standardized loadings ranged from .47 to .92 and were all significant at the .05 level. The squared multiple correlations for the variables were all adequate also ranging from .22 to .84. The results of the CFA for the latent variable Positive Social Competence are contained in Table 1.

Table 1: CFA for Positive Social Competence

Indicator		
Skills	.47*	.22
Relationships	.74*	.54
Goals	.92*	.84

Note. CFA=Confirmatory Factor Analysis; λ =Completely Standardized Factor Loadings; * signifies significant loading at $p < .05$; SMC=squared multiple correlations.

CFA for Social School Readiness. The latent variable social school readiness was ultimately included in the model as a three indicator model with each item from the social attention subscale of the BASE: Behavioral Academic Self Esteem, a rating scale (Coopersmith & Gilberts, 1982). The completely standardized loadings ranged from .58 to .84 and were all significant at the .05 level. The squared multiple correlations for the variables were all adequate also ranging from .34 to .71. The results of the CFA for the latent variable Social School Readiness are contained in Table 2.

Table 2: CFA for Social School Readiness

Indicator		
Fit Item 1	.59*	.34
Fit Item 2	.58*	.34
Fit Item 3	.84*	.71

Note. CFA=Confirmatory Factor Analysis; λ =Completely Standardized Factor Loadings; * signifies significant loading at $p < .05$; SMC=squared multiple correlations.

CFA for Self-Concept/Self-esteem. Three subscales of the BASE: Behavioral Academic Self Esteem-A rating scale (Coopersmith & Gilberts, 1982) were used as indicators for self-concept/self-esteem. Two of the indicators were the sum of two items and one was the sum of three items from the survey. The completely standardized loadings ranged from .44 to .88 and were all significant at the .05 level. The squared multiple correlations for the variables were all significant also ranging from .20 to .77. The results of the CFA for the latent variable Self-concept/Self-esteem are contained in Table 3.

Table 3: CFA for Self-concept/ Self-esteem

Indicator		
Self-confidence	.77*	.60
Social Attraction	.88*	.77
Success and Failure	.44*	.20

Note. CFA=Confirmatory Factor Analysis; λ =Completely Standardized Factor Loadings; * signifies significant loading at $p < .05$; SMC=squared multiple correlations.

Analysis of the Full Model

Next, a model was tested in order to evaluate the three-factor model, with one exogenous latent variable, positive social competence, affecting the two other variables. Post hoc modification indices suggested a better fitting model by freeing the correlated errors between indicators of the social school readiness latent variable. Since the two indicators were worded similarly, it made theoretical sense to make this modification. All of the squared multiple correlations were adequate for this model, ranging from .30 to .68 for the x-variables and .23 to .73 for the y-variables. The completely standardized factor loadings were all significant at the .05 level, ranging from .48 to .85. The paths from positive social competence to each endogenous latent variable were

also significant at the .05 level. The fit statistics for this model were $\chi^2=59.32(24\ df, n=159)$, $p=.0001$; RMSEA=.097, NNFI=.96; CFI=.97, SRMR=.05. Despite the RMSEA falling in the mediocre range, three of the four fit statistics demonstrated a good fitting model. Table 4 contains the fit indices for the model.

Table 4: Fit Indices for the Full Model

Model	df	χ^2	RMSEA	NNFI	CFI	SRMR
Endogenous	24	59.32	.097	.96	.97	.05

Note. χ^2 =Satorra-Bentler χ^2 ; RMSEA=Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; NNFI=Non-Normed Fit Index; CFI=Comparative Fit Index; SRMR=Standardized Root Mean Square.

DISCUSSION

A three-factor model was evaluated using structural equation modeling. This study shows support that social competence can lead to increases in school readiness and increases in self-esteem. Both increased self-esteem and school success, stemming from school readiness, can have long-term positive effects both academically and socially. This model shows social competence to be the main foundational element needed to drive increases in self-concept and help children be ready for school success. Environmentally-focused programs should be developed and implemented in early education to enhance social competence that include aspects of skills, relationships, and goals in order to produce these desired outcomes.

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