Do Emotional Support and Classroom Organization Earlier in the Year Set the Stage for Higher Quality Instruction?

Timothy W. Curby, Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, & Tasha Abry

INTRODUCTION
- Advice for elementary school teachers often states that establishing emotionally supportive and well-organized classroom environments early in the year contributes to improved instructional quality later in the year (Wong & Wong, 2004).
- Some professional development programs, such as the Responsive Classroom® (RC) approach, explicitly prepare teachers to start the year by bolstering classroom emotional support and organization with the goal of improved academic instruction (Denton & Kriete, 2000).
- Although this belief is widely held, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence examining this premise.

METHOD
- Participants and Procedure:
  - 240 third and fourth grade teachers participated from 24 schools in a large district.
  - 13 of the schools were randomized to be trained in the RC approach.
  - Teachers were videotaped for one hour at each of five points throughout the year in either morning or mathematics contexts.

Measures:
- Videos were coded with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) yielding scores in domains of Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support.
- Videos were also coded using the Classroom Practices Observational Measure (Abry, Brewer, Nathanson, Sawyer, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2010), an observational measure of teachers’ use of RC Practices.

INTRODUCTION

ANALYTIC APPROACH
- Cross-lagged autoregressive SEM models
  - In an autoregressive model, each variable is predicted by the same variable at the previous time point. The cross-lagged aspect refers to the addition of associations (added one set at a time) in subsequent models. The best fitting model based on chi-square change tests is reported as the final model (i.e., non-directional, unidirectional, or bidirectional).

Multi-group analysis
- To determine whether associations vary as a function of random assignment, a multi-group analysis based on treatment assignment was conducted which tested whether the model varied across treatment and control groups.

RESULTS
1. Higher emotional support earlier in the year predicted higher instructional support later in the year. In turn, higher instructional support earlier in the year predicted higher emotional support later in the year.
2. No support was found for relations from earlier classroom organization to later instructional support.
3. Teachers’ use of RC practices was associated with higher levels of emotional support and classroom organization.
4. The multigroup analysis indicated that the patterns of associations did not vary across RC and control groups, but that there was more use of RC practices in the RC intervention group.

COUNTERINTUITIVE FINDING
- Higher classroom organization earlier in the year was not associated with more instructional support later in the year.
  - There was a concurrent association between classroom organization and instructional support. Classroom organization may not be a pathway to later instructional support, but it was associated with higher levels of instructional support overall.
  - Aggregating dimensions of classroom organization up to the domain level could be masking changes in those dimensions (and thereby diminishing the associations with aspects of instructional support).
  - For instance, early in the year, a teacher may demonstrate use of the hands-up signal to quiet the class to establish a routine (scored high in behavior management but low in productivity and instructional learning formats).

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS
- Efforts to improve the social and emotional climate of classrooms may not only result in better classroom climates, but may also set the stage for better instruction.
- Use of RC practices was related to higher levels of Emotional Support and Classroom Organization. Training teachers in the RC approach is one way to increase teachers’ use of RC practices. Use of RC practices may directly promote the emotional supports and indirectly promote the instructional supports offered to students.

FINAL MODEL
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