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Promoting Mental Health and Positive Well-Being in Early Childhood: Delineating the Critical Role of the School

Timothy A. Hanchon and Kristin Scardamalia

The health and well-being of children and youth in the United States continue to be of significant and pressing concern among professionals within the public health and educational sectors. Some findings indicate notable population-level declines over the past several decades on a number of important childhood indexes including health, well-being, and social relationships (Dodge, 2018; Land, 2017). Recent estimates suggest that as many as one in five pre-school aged children meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder (e.g., Dougherty et al., 2015). Additionally, children from lower income or culturally/linguistically diverse families have inequitable access to vitally needed, appropriate services that promote health and well-being (e.g., Jain et al., 2019). Given their ready accessibility to children and their families, schools are well-positioned to play a critical role in promoting young children's positive mental health and well-being but to do this well requires preparation, planning, and parental engagement, not to mention reliable methods and tools for assessing and addressing all aspects of student mental health.

Early childhood and the transition into schools are crucial developmental periods in a child's life. The first year of school sets the stage for a child's academic career in many ways; children begin to define themselves as good students (or not) and parents' initial experiences with the school staff set the expectations about the viability and value of home-school collaborative relationships. While parent involvement and teacher-student relationships are important at all stages of school, they are especially critical in early childhood education as children are more dependent on the adults in their lives to meet their needs. Well prepared educators, strong parent-teacher relationships, and a commitment to bolstering

child well-being are key elements in laying a foundation for school success. While these elements are frequent topics in the K-12 literature, less attention has been paid to pre-kindergarten and early childhood; however, strong support and intervention in the early years decreases the need for additional intervention and supports in later years. Intervention and support for well-being in early childhood promote better school behavior (Nold et al., 2021), can contribute to lowering the achievement gap (Bivens et al., 2016), and have been associated with positive long-term outcomes like lower rates of teen pregnancy and reduced frequency of criminal activity (Campbell et al., 2002). Other studies have found quality preschool programs are associated with decreases in special education placement and grade retention as well as increased high school graduation rates (Barnett 2008). Further, quality early childhood programming is fiscally advantageous to the country. One study estimates the financial benefits of providing high quality education to all 3- and 4-year-old children would be approximately \$10 billion dollars over a 34-year period (Lynch & Vaghul, 2015). While many studies employed small model programs, further research demonstrated that comparable results can be achieved by large, publicly funded schools as long as there is strong training and support for teachers, a quality curriculum, and engaged parents (Bivens et. al., 2016).

This special issue, informed by the co-editors' professional experiences as school psychologists, addresses three crucial areas for quality early childhood education that promote the well-being of children, giving them the maximum chance at success: professional training and development; parent engagement and parent-teacher relationships; and assessing and addressing social emotional well-being in young children.

Professional development begins in education preparation programs; however, coursework on child mental health is often missing from training programs. Candelaria and colleagues suggest one way to address the resulting need is to use teacher coaching

by mental health professionals trained in early childhood and education. The authors present ongoing work in the state of Maryland on a model of statewide coordination of National Pyramid Model (NPM) and Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC). Specialized training, including infant and early childhood mental health theory, concepts, and practices, as well as post-graduation support in early childhood education enables social workers to provide support and coaching to early childhood educators. Likewise, Adams and colleagues take the training to the educators themselves, presenting data on the components of professional development for early childhood educators which increase teacher skills in both teaching and modeling social emotional learning – a crucial competent of student well-being. Using a combination of training, consultation, on-site coaching, and on-going opportunities for professional development, the authors find positive results for improving teachers' self-regulation and modeling of appropriate social emotional skills.

Relatedly, McGoey and colleagues discuss improving teachers' SEL skills as a preventative measure against teacher burnout – a significant issue in education as teacher shortages are increasing. The authors examine how the social-emotional needs of early childhood educators can be supported as they implement and sustain social emotional learning through teacher focused interventions such as supporting mindfulness and increasing or enhancing the perceptions of emotional safety in the classroom. And finally, even with the best training and support, teachers will still encounter challenging behaviors in the classroom – a primary source of burnout leading to poor educator retention. Stankus and colleagues explore the impact of Teacher-Child Interaction Training (TCIT) on child behavior, teacher-student relationships, and teacher satisfaction within a general preschool setting. An overall decrease in challenging behaviors was found and importantly, the intervention was rated as not only acceptable, but also feasible by the educators.

The second broad area of focus within this special issue is parent engagement and parent-teacher relationships, which are critical to early childhood success. Students whose parents are highly stressed often have more difficulty than their peers adjusting to school. In this light, Amirazizi and colleagues report on findings that supporting parents with preparatory information, including information about instructional practices, especially when parents are unfamiliar with the US school system, improves both short-term and long-term child outcomes. Bertone and colleagues dig deeper into the cultural context of parent engagement from a Latinx perspective, delineating the concept of *Educación* and capturing unique elements of parental engagement from a Latinx perspective. Notably, the concept of *Educación* specifically includes social-emotional development and socialization as core elements of child education. Washington-Nortey and colleagues extend parental involvement to examine the associations between the quality of the parent-teacher relationship and teacher-child conflict, finding a moderating effect of teachers' emotional states. The findings have implications not only for the teacher-child interactions but for reducing teacher burnout as well.

While attending to factors in the child's world that contribute to well-being, schools need methods and tools to identify and progress monitor positive student mental health. Reaves and colleagues begin the discussion at the organizational level, examining the need for an assessment to assist schools and districts in planning, assessing, and ultimately improving preschool mental health systems. Similar measures are available for K-12 systems and the authors provide guidance on the development of organizational assessment specific to preschools. Aligning with this system-wide approach, Daniels and colleagues systematically review research on school-based teacher-report screening tools for social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) concerns in preschool students. Early screening and support can reduce the use of reactive and exclusionary disciplinary practices such as suspension

and expulsion – consequences disproportionately experienced by students of color. Missall and colleagues narrow the focus to examine a teacher rating scale of social competence and school adjustment for preschool and kindergarten children that focuses on positive aspects of children’s social and emotional development. The scale helps promote fostering positive behavior and adjustment versus treating maladaptive behavior. Lastly, Dale and colleagues bring together the focus on home-school cooperation and specific attention to positive social emotional development via an examination of incorporating social emotional learning (SEL) goals into the Individualized Education Plans of young children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This case illustration provides a concrete example of the positive outcomes possible when systems, parents, teachers, and instructional practice are aligned to address student well-being and social emotional development.

In closing, our overarching aim for this special issue of *Perspectives in Early Childhood Psychology and Education* is to highlight ideas and initiatives that hold great promise for promoting the mental health and psychological well-being of the early childhood population. Certainly, focusing our attention on professional training and development, parent-teacher collaborations, and assessment of student needs should not be regarded as all-encompassing, let alone any sort of panacea with respect to meeting the holistic needs of children. Nevertheless, we are hopeful that the current special issue adds to the extant literature and continues to move the proverbial ball forward in terms of highlighting two fundamental ideals: (1) supporting young children’s positive mental health has significant long-term benefits for students as well as society more generally, and (2) the critical role of the school in facilitating the promotion of students’ well-being.

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