IMPACT AREA:
Classroom Experiences & Learning Opportunities

Why Do They Matter?

Intentional, effective experiences and learning opportunities in classroom environments allow students to access and act on information, interact with instructional content and with one another, and develop academic and social skills necessary for future success. It is important to understand aspects of the classroom environment that predict optimal student performance to help narrow opportunity gaps and ensure learning success. Intentional practices and approaches include classroom learning opportunities created and supported by adults, peer interactions, and strategies used by teachers to support the development of students' academic and social-emotional skills.

ELN'S CONTRIBUTION

ELN research has improved our understanding of associations between experiences in the classroom and gains in children's early learning outcomes. This includes associations between specific instructional practices, curriculum content, classroom environments and structures, peer relationships and a host of outcomes in the early years of schooling.

What We Learned

Targeted, positive classroom experiences, including one-on-one language exchanges, teacher-student interactions, student-student interactions, exposure to content-rich instruction and modeling/scaffolding, are associated with students' skills. Classroom learning opportunities, such as large group activities, and strategies, including behavior management and routine cues, are not consistently positively associated with student outcomes.
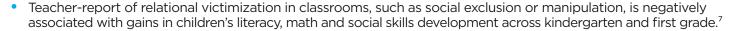
SUPPORTING FINDINGS

- During pre-K, teacher-child language interactions and teacher involvement in educational activities[1,2] are associated with gains in expressive language and literacy skills.[1] More time spent in large- compared to small-group instruction is negatively associated with students' gains in expressive language and literacy skills.[1]

- Pre-K children are generally more likely to actively participate verbally when experiencing academic learning opportunities as compared to non-instructional opportunities and when their teachers engage by talking more with students.[3]

- Pre-K teachers use a variety of organizational strategies. Modeling an instructional activity through teacher demonstration appears positively related to children's math (but not other academic or executive function) skills. Behavior management organizational strategies and routine cues are not associated with gains in academic or executive function skills, perhaps because there was less frequency of use in observed classrooms.[4]

- Content-rich instruction predicts positive gains in math skills across the pre-K year regardless of students' income status, race/ethnicity or dual language learner status.[5]

- Didactic instruction and scaffolding as instructional strategies appear to differentially relate to social skill outcomes among first grade students. Higher occurrences of scaffolding, a teaching method that gradually supports students as they learn and develop a new concept, is predictive of students' positive attitudes toward learning, greater social skills and fewer problem behaviors. Alternatively, when teachers provide more didactic (e.g., direct) instruction than scaffolded experiences, students are more likely to show negative attitudes toward learning, lower attention/persistence and fewer social skills.[6]

- Teacher-report of relational victimization in classrooms, such as social exclusion or manipulation, is negatively associated with gains in children's literacy, math and social skills development across kindergarten and first grade.[7]

Takeaways & Action Steps

The key takeaways and action steps for practice, policy and research are intended to be:

- **Inclusive of all children**, but especially relevant for children from marginalized groups (e.g., racially minoritized, dual language learners).

- **Culturally responsive** in application.

- **Relevant across varied geographic contexts**.

- **The shared responsibility** of all educational faculty, administrators and staff.

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES & LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

KEY TAKEAWAY

Children's opportunities and experiences in classrooms should include **culturally responsive, intentional and supportive interactions** focused on **social-emotional, cognitive and language development**.

ACTION STEPS		
Practice	*Policy*	*Research*
Provide pre-service and in-service educators, administrators and support staff with **high-quality professional learning opportunities**, including customized training and coaching, to support the implementation of **culturally responsive, intentional and supportive**: • One-on-one, **formal and informal language exchanges.** • **Teacher-student and student-student** interactions. • Developmentally sequenced, **content-rich** instruction. • **Modeling/scaffolding**.	Ensure **family voice** is included in decision-making structures and processes to enhance learning among all children, including those from marginalized groups.	Develop or improve **research-based** tools that are **culturally responsive** for **measuring individualized children's experiences, skills and outcomes,** including constructs related to learning, such as creativity, joy and multiple dialects.

▶ Dig Deeper

Watch a short research presentation to learn more about the Early Learning Network's findings related to classroom experiences and learning opportunities.

To access the video, visit our media library or use your phone's camera to scan the QR code.

Presenter: Virginia Vitiello, Ph.D., *University of Virginia*

ENDNOTES

[1]Bratsch-Hines, M. E., Burchinal, M., Peisner-Feinberg, E., Franco, X. (2019). Frequency of instructional practices in rural prekindergarten classrooms and associations with child language and literacy skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 47*, 74-88.

[2]Pianta, R.C., Whittaker, J.E., Vitiello, V.E., Ruzek, E.A., Ansari, A., Hofkens, T., & DeCoster, J. (2020). Children's school readiness skills across the pre-K year: Associations with teacher-student interactions, teacher practices, and exposure to academic content. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 66*, 101084.

[3]Connor, C. M., Adams, A., Zargar, E., Wood, T. S., Hernandez, B. E., & Lowe-Vandell, D. (2020). Observing individual children in early childhood classrooms using Optimizing Learning Opportunities for Students (OLOS): A feasibility study. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 52*, 74-89.

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[5] Maier, M.F., McCormick, P., Xia, S., Hsueh, J., Weiland, C., Morales, A., Boni, M., Tonachel, M., Sachs, J., & Snow, C. (2022). Content-rich instruction and cognitive demand in pre-k: using systematic observations to predict child gains. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 60*, 96-109.

[6]Boise, C., Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Iruka, I. U., Witte, A. L., & Prokasky, A. (2021, April 7–9). Classroom approaches related to children's academic and social-emotional outcomes in early elementary school. In S. M. Sheridan (Chair), *Teacher practices and individual student experiences: Measuring influences on pre-kindergarten through third grade students* [Symposium]. Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Virtual Conference, United States.

[7]Xiao, N., Lin, T. -J., Lu, M., Sun, J., Ansari, A., Justice, L., Purtell, K., & Chen, J. (2022, August). *Cross-informant congruency of relational victimization for young children at school* [Poster]. American Psychological Association 2022 Convention, Minneapolis, MN, United States.