

Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 3
Issue 2 *Measuring Success in Public Education*

Article 12

2012

A Step in the Right Direction: Development of the Computerized Assessment for Preschool Social Emotional Learning (CAPSEL)

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Ursula (2012) "A Step in the Right Direction: Development of the Computerized Assessment for Preschool Social Emotional Learning (CAPSEL)," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1120>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol3/iss2/12>

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Social and emotional development is one of five domains indicated as necessary for children's readiness for school¹. Young children find it difficult to learn academic skills if they cannot attend to their teachers, follow directions, play cooperatively with peers, or appropriately regulate their emotions and behavior. Furthermore, "Learning is a social process,"² and students learn in the social contexts of their families, schools, and communities. The transition from home to school can be socially and emotionally fraught for many children because of educators' expectations for children to regulate their emotions and behaviors, as well as emphasis on goal-directed activities, cooperative play, and rule compliance.³ Therefore, social and emotional skills are as important as academic skills for school entry.

From the past three decades of research, it is clear that young children's emotional and social development is important for their school readiness and success.^{4,5} Children's social and emotional learning (SEL) encompasses five core competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.^{5,6} Self-management is a child's ability to express emotions appropriately, regulate emotions in stressful situations, control impulses, and persevere during challenging tasks. Children express self-awareness when they accurately recognize their own feelings, such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. Social awareness is perspective-taking and empathizing with others. For example, a socially aware preschooler may offer a favorite toy to a friend that is upset to try to calm him. The preschooler recognizes that her friend is feeling a negative emotion and that offering a toy would make the peer feel better. Children with positive relationship skills are able to establish and maintain healthy relationships; preschoolers may accomplish this through cooperative play throughout the day. Responsible decision-making begins with making safe, ethical, and appropriate choices. SEL teaches children skills to understand and manage their emotions, develop empathy, initiate and maintain positive relationships, make good choices, and deal with challenging issues constructively and ethically. In practical terms, this allows a preschooler to handle frustration and anger appropriately, make new friends, resolve conflicts, and make choices in a school setting, while simultaneously learning academic skills.

Although SEL has been positively linked to academic achievement,⁷ there are a limited number of assessment tools that measure social and emotional learning in the school context.⁸ Denham and colleagues have attempted to fill the gap by developing a comprehensive assessment tool to measure SEL for preschoolers to be used by teachers in early childhood educational settings. This tool has three primary functions: 1) formative assessment 2) summative assessment, and 3) program evaluation. Denham and colleagues were meticulous in mapping their assessment battery to the aforementioned core competencies, which they labeled self-regulation (i.e. self-management and self-awareness), social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship/social skills. The researchers sought to adapt and computerize previous measures that predicted children's social competence, classroom adjustment, and academic readiness, and reliably and validly measured SEL constructs.

The objectives of the assessment battery, Computerized Assessment for Preschool Social Emotional Learning (CAPSEL), are for teachers to track students' growth in SEL and change instruction (if necessary) to meet the individual needs of children, provide outcome reports to educators, and provide evaluation of school programs with aggregate data. In order for CAPSEL to be useful, it must: 1) provide specific feedback to show student deficits, 2) be accessible so teachers can act upon the data in a timely fashion, and 3) be understandable so teachers can translate information into practice.^{9,10} Previous research has examined the role of technology in supporting teachers' use of data to inform instructional design¹¹⁻¹⁴ suggesting that teachers' use of CAPSEL may yield positive results for SEL. Progress monitoring through technology-based data collection allows for timely change in teacher-level behaviors that would intervene on student-level behaviors through intervention based on data.

Professional development and technical assistance concerning the assessment battery would be necessary for adequate use of the tool, but teachers and directors of early childhood facilities have expressed concern about resources necessary to use such a tool, according to previous feedback by Denham and colleagues. Time management to monitor the development of each child in a classroom may be unwieldy for

some teachers, and access to technology to use the tool may be prohibitive to smaller early education programs. Through further focus groups and pilot testing, Denham and colleagues should be able to determine the feasibility of CAPSEL. As it stands, CAPSEL will be a necessary tool for educators to provide feedback on preschoolers' SEL.

Outside of the purview of the article, but closely linked as a next step, is the professional development of teachers in SEL. It follows that once teachers use the new technology and receives computer-generated feedback of what skills children may be weak in, teachers would then need concrete action steps to increase the social and emotional skills of children. Previous research has found that professional development programs that target teachers of at-risk preschool children that included mentoring and detailed, instructionally linked feedback yielded positive results in teacher behaviors and children's school readiness skills.¹⁵ Future research should examine how best to provide detailed, individualized, electronic feedback that would increase the effectiveness of teacher behaviors, and therefore positively affect student social and emotional skills. CAPSEL is one big step in the right direction in monitoring preschoolers' SEL skills in an educational setting by using a research-based tool.

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