Chapter 2
The Relationship of Classroom Behavior and Income Inequality to Literacy in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the association between nurturing prosocial classroom behavior in young children, literacy, and income inequality. Literacy will be explored as it relates to social competence in the classroom as influenced by income inequity. One highlighted area of importance is a play-based, child-focused environment that is culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of the whole child. Socioeconomic disparities in literacy skills have been increasing over the past 40 years. This subject must be addressed in order to effectively meet the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of each individual child. Literacy skills are developed during early childhood. It is also the case that limited literacy during early childhood increases the risk of children displaying aggressive behavior at school as they progress to higher grades. For these reasons, tackling the problem during the early years with developmentally appropriate adult-child interventions are what is needed to reverse the trends placing an increasing number of young children at-risk of academic underachievement.

INTRODUCTION

Research has consistently indicated a strong relationship between social skills and academic achievement (Wimmer & Draper, 2019). The nature of this connection between lower academic achievement and disruptive classroom behavior during the early years is often related to a young child's difficulties with learning to read (Bassok et al., 2016). The development of the skills of sustaining focused attention and avoiding distractions are linked to literacy development (Washington et al., 2019). The ability

to read depends on the cognitive skill of sustained focused attention. Different components of attention influence each dimension of learning to read. Additionally, both the accuracy and speed at which an individual is able to sustain focused attention play a pivotal role in literacy development. The selective attention required to focus on a specific skill is involved in all dimensions of reading (Gordon et al., 2019). There is considerable evidence that academic problems, such as limited literacy exacerbate disruptive classroom behavior (Blewitt et al., 2020). The negative impact of limited reading, writing, and verbal communication skill on classroom behavior appears to increase as the child advances to higher grades (Schmidt et al., 2015). Limited reading readiness and literacy skill development at the beginning of a school year tends to predict increased disruptive classroom behavior by the end of the school year (Bodovski & Youn, 2011). In contrast, literacy achievement tends to be positively correlated with less disruptive classroom behavior (Blewitt et al., 2021).

A major problem early childhood educators contend with on any given school day is trying to extinguish disruptive classroom behavior that seems to chronically interrupts the task of facilitating literacy skill development. There is substantial correlation among the three topics of this chapter: classroom behavior, income inequality, and literacy. This relationship impacts thousands of students and teachers in classrooms every day. The key points and procedures for dealing with challenging behavior in the classroom need to be understood and utilized by early childhood educators to better support the children in our care, especially those living in poverty. Despite the causes of disruptive classroom behavior (i.e., economic inequality, developmentally inappropriate parenting or teaching skills, or social inequality) the solution is found in the developmentally appropriate child guidance suggestions that are outlined in this chapter (Mosier, 2013b). Dealing with disruptive behavior in the classroom is difficult without a clear plan for how to extinguish disruptive behavior while nurturing self-regulation at the same time. This chapter describes six strategies to nurture self-directedness and self-regulation in young children. They include:

1. A cooperative approach to generating classroom rules. (Freeman et al., 2019).
2. How to verbally reinforce socially competent behavior. (AAP, 2021; Jenkins et al., 2015).
3. Allowing natural and logical consequences to redirect disruptive behavior (AAP, 2021; Strain et al., 2017).
4. Modeling pro-social interactions (McLeod et al., 2017; Mosier, 2013a, 2013b).
5. Utilizing interventions that nurture self-regulation (AAP, 2021; McLeod et al., 2017; Mosier, 2013a, 2013b).
6. Being persistently consistent in the application of any intervention strategies (Gartrell, 2014; Mosier, 2013b; Reinke et al., 2013).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR, INCOME INEQUALITY, AND LITERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Literacy competencies include vocabulary knowledge and word recognition skills such as decoding and letter-sound recognition, but also skill in interpersonal communication (Reuben et al., 2019). Most young children enter kindergarten with basic letter recognition skills (Suggate et al., 2019). Between the first and third grades most young children can recognize words by sight (Fisher, 2018). However, a significant number of children by eighth grade do not have an adequate literacy knowledge base for

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