

Shager, H. (2012). What Role Do Peer Effects Play in Early Childhood Education? Evidence from the 2003 Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)

ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that the peer composition of a student's class may influence educational outcomes, yet little attention has been paid to the role peers may play in affecting children's preschool experiences. There are developmental differences between preschoolers and older children, as well as differences in the pedagogical structure of early education compared with later schooling, which suggest that one should not simply extrapolate findings from peer effects research with older children to preschool settings.

This study uses longitudinal data from the 2003 Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), a nationally representative sample of Head Start children, to estimate associations between peers' pre-academic and behavior skills and students' pre-academic and behavior outcomes after one year in the program. Value-added (lagged dependent variable) modeling and a rich set of controls for child, family, and classroom characteristics are used to reduce omitted variable bias, and multilevel modeling is used to account for the data structure (students nested in classrooms). Additionally, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression is used to explore associations between average classroom pre-academic and behavior skills and measures of classroom process quality.

Findings suggest that, indeed, preschool peers may influence children's pre-academic and behavior skills development, as well as preschool classroom process quality. In the pre-academic domain, I find robust, positive associations between peer and individual reading skills, as well as a weaker positive link between peer and individual vocabulary skills. In the behavior domain, robust, positive associations exist between positive peer and individual behaviors (specifically, for learning behaviors and pro-social skills). I also find a negative association

between classroom-level behavior problems and classroom process quality, in terms of teacher behavior.

Taken together, these findings suggest that policy makers should consider peer composition in their calculus of potential tradeoffs between targeted or universal preschool programs, which are likely to differ in terms of student heterogeneity and average baseline skills. Furthermore, even if program composition is largely unalterable, knowing that peers contribute to preschoolers' learning recommends teacher training regarding the use of proven collaborative learning and behavior management techniques that maximize the benefits of peer effects within the classroom.