

FAST MOVING FRONTS - 2009

November 2009



Bridget Hamre talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's Fast Moving Front in the field of Social Sciences, general. The author has also sent along images of their work.



Article: Can instructional and emotional support in the first-grade classroom make a difference for children at risk of school failure?

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Journal: CHILD DEVELOP, 76 (5): 949-967 SEP-OCT 2005

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SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

This paper came out at a time when there was renewed interest in understanding the ways in which classrooms and teachers can contribute to positive outcomes for students. Despite a lot of evidence in the developmental literature about the importance of children's relationships and interactions with adults in early childhood settings and a considerable research base on effective teaching practices in the K-12 educational literature, few studies had used developmental, observational methodologies in K-12 classrooms.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD) was quite innovative in this way and has produced the largest number of papers to date on the ways in which students' interactions in classrooms can facilitate both social and academic development.

SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?

This was one of the studies published out of the NICHD SECCYD study which took advantage of unprecedented classroom level data on teachers and students in a large number of classrooms (over 800) across the country. The observational methodology used in this study allowed us to examine classroom level processes in a way that hadn't been done often before.

In the past five years since this paper was published, this type of classroom observational research in preschool to 12th grade classrooms has expanded rapidly. For example, the measure that we

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ultimately derived from this work, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is now being used in hundreds of studies across the country and internationally.

SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

These findings provide evidence of the potential for everyday interactions between teachers and students to close achievement and social gaps in the early school years. The findings support school reforms aimed at improving teacher quality, but only when such efforts focus on the actual instructional and social-emotional interactions that take place in classrooms.

Unfortunately, classroom quality is highly varied and overall rather mediocre and few children are consistently exposed to high quality from year to year, even within the same school. If children are not systematically exposed to high levels of classroom support across time, the effects of such positive placements are likely to be short-lived.

SW: How did you become involved in this research and were any particular problems encountered along the way?

I am interested at conducting research at the intersection of developmental and educational sciences. I was not directly involved in collecting data for this study, but I know from other studies the incredible challenges of collecting high-quality data in the messy real world of schools.

There is a real need to increase institutional capacity to support educational research, both at the university and the K-12 level. Schools are often too busy to support research efforts which make recruitment and data collection quite difficult.

SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?

I am focused now on work that seeks to improve teachers' use of effective teacher-child interactions from preschool through 12th grade. Along with Bob Pianta and other colleagues at the Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) and the National Center for Research in Early Childhood Education (NCRECE), we have developed and tested several forms of interventions for teachers, including coursework and a consultation model called MyTeachingPartner.

These studies indicate the ways wherein intentionally designed interventions in which teachers are focused explicitly on their interactions with students can help improve the educational system and promote more positive outcomes for students.

SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?

There have been pretty major policy implications from this work. The best example of that comes from the Office of Head Start's use of the CLASS observational measure as a monitoring tool nationwide. OHS decided that the CLASS offered a unique way to help them provide feedback and support to Head Start programs about the kind of teacher-child interactions that can really make a difference for young children.

As one OHS staff member said: "In many ways I feel that we are standing on the precipice of a transformative moment in Head Start. With an assessment tool like the CLASS, we've found a missing piece of the puzzle that we've been looking for, for a very long time. A tool that helps assess the quality of teacher-child interactions can help strengthen the qualities of our programs by focusing on something that we know is so important to a young child's life—supportive relationships built on quality interactions." (Amanda Bryans, Director Educational Development and Partnerships Division, Office of Head Start – November 2008)


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KEYWORDS: DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOPATHOLOGY; KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM; TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS; ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT; ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL; MENTAL-HEALTH; CARE; PREVENTION; BEHAVIOR;

OUTCOMES.

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