A Longitudinal Examination of Socioemotional Learning in African American and Latino Boys Across the Transition From Pre-K to Kindergarten

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Questions about socioemotional learning in boys of color (BOC) arise in light of the disproportionate rates of school adjustment difficulties BOC experience by adolescence. Socioemotional competence in BOC is assessed in terms of self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and positive relationships with peers and teachers when they enter pre-K. Changes in competence are tracked until the end of kindergarten. Teachers from randomly selected early childhood programs in 11 states rated children’s socioemotional competence in the fall and spring of pre-K. Children were followed through the end of kindergarten. Analyses compared Black (n = 278) and Latino (n = 347) boys to girls of color (n = 624) and White children (n = 1,209) while controlling for family poverty. Pre-K teachers rated a majority of BOC proficient on self-regulation and peer relations. BOC did not differ from White boys on initial competence ratings or on development over time, although boys as a group were rated as less competent than girls. Although gender mattered in the initial assessment of socioemotional competence, gender was unrelated to change in competence over time. The longitudinal analyses showed a decline in teacher ratings of socioemotional competence from pre-K to kindergarten. This decline was most likely attributable to the demands, structure, and didactic approaches common in kindergarten. Social competence did predict academic skills. Self-regulation of emotions was the domain most consistently related to academic functioning. The vulnerability BOC experience during adolescence is not evident in the levels of social competence they demonstrate early in their lives at school.

Questions often arise about the state of socioemotional learning (SEL) among boys of color (BOC) because of their disproportionately high rates of school adjustment difficulties by the time they reach adolescence. By the end of primary school, many BOC growing up in low socioeconomic status (SES) communities are often considered at high risk of aggression, conduct problems, and subpar academic achievement (Barbarin, 1999, 2002; Barbarin & Soler, 1993; Farmer & Bierman, 2002). These difficulties, combined with misguided school practices, subject boys to disproportionately high rates of disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions from school (Barbarin, 2010). This investigation of socioemotional competence development of BOC early in their school lives is motivated by the desire to shed light on the origins and timing of their school difficulties that, in turn, might strengthen the case for SEL curricula in school. This research also tests the degree to which socioemotional competence is linked to academic achievement and thus adds to the case for SEL interventions in schools (Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Shields et al., 2001; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007).

The potential for SEL to reduce the vulnerability of BOC to school difficulties has been ignored more often than it has been seriously debated. Proponents of SEL argue that socioemotional competencies are not only foundational to individual well-being but are also integral to academic success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). SEL contributes to a climate of comity and productivity in schools in that disruptive behavior is minimized because children are able to focus attention, identify feelings, cope with frustrations and disappointments, manage conflicts without resorting to aggression, cooperate with others, and cultivate close friendships (McKown, Gumbiner, Russo, & Lipton, 2009). SEL is broadly conceived in terms of the development of self-awareness, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills that lay a foundation for later adjustment (Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002). The guiding notion behind SEL is that through guided reflection and intentional instruction at school, children come to recognize their own intentions and impulses, moderate their emotional reactions, direct their attention, and cultivate positive relationships with peers and adults (Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991).

Social Functioning

Interpersonal skills, a component of socioemotional competence, refer to a combination of interactional styles, social behavior, and relationship quality. The quality of peer relationships early in boys’ lives is especially important. Poor relationships...
at the entry to school are associated with a host of adverse behavioral and academic outcomes through adolescence (Brendgen, Vitaro, Bukowski, & Doyle, 2001). Relationships with peers are important not only for psychological well-being but also because children who have favorable relationships with peers are less likely to avoid school and more likely to be invested and do well academically (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). Boys who are high in interpersonal skills are often outgoing, affable, and popular. Positive relationships with peers, characterized as a child's ability to form strong social bonds with others and to work and play constructively with others (Thompson & Twibell, 2009), are facilitated by the same qualities of agreeableness, flexibility, support, and an ability to resolve conflicts that are required for positive relationships with adults. In interactions, they come across as friendly and sensitive, and others respond well to them, as reflected in their popularity and ability to influence others. Children who are flexible, empathic, and caring and who are not argumentative or aggressive tend to do better at forming and sustaining positive peer relationships (Hintzamen, Alatupa, Pullmann, Hirstio-Snellman, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2010).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Rubin, Bukowski, and Parker (2006) noted that children with poor peer relations are more often characterized as exhibiting friendship destabilizing behaviors that discourage or subvert social ties. These destabilizing behaviors include having difficulty initiating social contact, entering a peer group that has already formed, and maintaining social connections over time. Poor relations with peers are also reflected in deficits in emotional self-regulation, such as when children are easily angered, are impulsive, lack empathy, and are uncaring and dishonest in dealings with others. Difficulty in peer relationships is often characterized by aggression, avoidance, negative reciprocity, and rejection by peers.

Relationships with adults outside of the home that are of high support and low conflict facilitate children's interpersonal skills (Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997). These relationships are critical, first for the child's safety and survival. They can also be an important resource for the child to learn to regulate arousal and organize responses to stress. The level of physiological response that young children experienced in emotionally, socially, or cognitively challenging situations was moderated by the presence and engagement of adult caregivers (Calkins & Dedmon, 2000; Calkins & Keane, 2004). Researchers have consistently found that the emotional quality of the relationship of a child with a preschool teacher is related to positive social adjustment and academic achievement in later grades (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Pianta & Stuhllman, 2004a,b). For example, children who had positive emotional relationships with teachers in early childhood classrooms evidenced higher levels of learning and showed greater gains on later measures of literacy and math (Mashburn et al., 2008). It is possible that a positive relationship with a teacher is a protective factor. Teachers may be better able to manage oppositional behavior more easily and avoid disruptions in the classroom, as the student is more responsive to teachers' efforts to redirect or channel behavior into more productive activities that foster, or at least do not interfere with, learning and academic achievement.

It is easy to understand why the development of socioemotional skills might be challenging for BOC. BOC face hardships in life that can result in adverse social, emotional, and academic outcomes and, in turn, lead to lifelong impairment and marginalization (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). For both African American and Latino boys, the multiple strains associated with poverty, such as housing insecurity, exposure to trauma and violence, family distress, and social stigma, represent considerable challenges (Aber, Morris, & Raver, 2012). Moreover, the hardships arising from household poverty are often compounded by enrollment in failing schools where inadequate instruction, low morale, high teacher and student absenteeism, and overreliance on coercive discipline are the norm (Rashid, 2009). For some Latino boys, additional challenges arise from the strains of immigration and acculturation, from acquiring English as a second language, and in some cases, from the uncertainties related to family legal status. These hardships make for a distinctive social niche that renders school success elusive, particularly for those growing up in low-income households. In spite of the obstacles inherent in growing up poor, BOC under auspicious conditions overcome the odds and acquire the socioemotional and academic competence needed to meet the demands of schooling (e.g., Kohler & Lazarin, 2007; Tsai-A-Fatt, 2010).

**Summary Statement of the Research Problem**

Children require a range of social competencies to navigate through life, accommodate to the demands of their social environment, and acquire academic skills needed for success as adults. Most often included among these social competencies are self-regulation, interpersonal ties, and social communication skills (specifically, the ability to regulate emotions, attention, and behavior; the ability to get along with and develop interpersonal ties with peers and adults; and the ability to communicate personal needs with clarity). It is asserted here that these social competencies are the foundation on which academic and psychological adjustments are built. Concerns about the adjustment difficulties of adolescent BOC at school and in the community lead naturally to questions about the solidity of the foundation of social competencies laid in early childhood. A focus on early development of socioemotional competencies may offer the best insights about ways to arrest the difficulties that impede school adjustment of BOC by the time they reach adolescence (Calderella, Christensen, Kramer, & Kronmiller, 2009). Early childhood settings have been demonstrated to be auspicious settings that can lead to gains in children's social and academic competence (Howes et al., 2008; Reynolds, Mehana, & Temple, 1995). Preschool is the time when specific peer relationships emerge and become more stable, defined, and exclusive and, at the same time, present more frequent conflict (Gottman, 1983; Hartup, 1996; Parker & Gottman, 1989). For this reason, early childhood programs are a useful point from which to initiate an examination of the developmental course of socioemotional competence in BOC. Accordingly, this article presents SEL data on boys enrolled in state-sponsored pre-K programs and compares the trajectories of African American, Latino, and White boys from the beginning of the pre-K to the end of kindergarten. This article also examines the relation of socioemotional competencies with early literacy and math skills.
This article addresses four questions related to the development of socioemotional competence among BOC.

- What proportion of BOC are considered proficient in socioemotional competencies at the start of their lives in school and how do they compare to White boys and to girls?
- How do these competencies develop and developmental trajectories differ by gender, race or ethnicity, or poverty status?
- To what extent are these competencies related to academic achievement?

Gains in socioemotional competence are expected from pre-K to kindergarten as a consequence of socialization and maturation, and it is expected that boys will show increasing levels of self-regulation and improved relationships with peers. Under difficult life circumstances and multiple struggles associated with poverty, it is likely that boys growing up in poor households will evidence less propitious trajectories in the development of socioemotional competencies. In addition, socioemotional competence is expected to be related to academic achievement. Specifically, BOC who are lower on self-regulation, socioemotional competence, and positive peer relations will also have lower scores on academic measures.

**Method**

**Study Design and Sample**

This study relies on data from two related projects completed by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) on state-funded prekindergarten programs: Project 1, the Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten, included six states, and Project 2, the State-Wide Early Education Programs Study (SWEP), used identical measures in an additional five states.

Data for Project 1 were gathered during the 2001–2002 school year in California, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, New York, and Ohio. In each state, a stratified random sample of 40 centers or schools was selected from the list of all the schools and centers or programs provided to us by each state’s department of education. Within each randomly selected site, the director or principal selected one classroom randomly. Teachers sent recruitment packets home with all children enrolled in the classroom. Eligible children were those who (a) would be old enough for kindergarten in the fall of 2002, (b) did not have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and (c) spoke English or Spanish well enough to understand simple instructions, according to the teacher. Whenever possible, two girls and two boys were selected in each classroom. In the fall of 2001, 940 children participated. Within each state, a team of well-trained data collectors conducted the observations and assessments.

Data collection for Project 2 took place during the 2003–2004 school year in five states: Massachusetts, New Jersey, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. These states were selected to augment data from the states already in the Multi-State project. The design called for recruiting 100 randomly selected state-funded prekindergarten sites from a list of all sites provided by the state. In total, 465 sites participated in the fall. The combined studies provide detailed information on prekindergarten teachers, children, and classrooms in 11 states. Across both projects, data were obtained on over 2,900 prekindergarten children in these 11 states. In 2001–2002, 79% of all children in the United States who were participating in state-funded prekindergarten were in one of these 11 states.

**Teachers and pre-K programs.** Almost all teachers were female (99%). On average, they were 41 years old (range: 22 years–73 years), 64% were White, 15% were Latina, and 13% were African American. Teachers averaged 8.56 years of experience in teaching prekindergarten, 73% held at least a Bachelor’s degree, and 57% were certified by their state to teach 4-year-olds. Thirty-two percent of teachers reported that they or another teacher spoke Spanish in the classroom.

Table 1 presents mean percentage data for the ethnic composition of the classrooms children attended by race ethnicity. These data suggest that schools continue to be racially segregated in that children attend schools in which their own ethnic group is the majority of children. The average pre-K class size was 17.4 in fall of the pre-K year, with ratios of 7.6 children for each paid adult in the room. Teachers reported that on average, 21% of children in their classrooms entered pre-K with limited English proficiency. An average of 6% of students in each classroom had special needs and a formal IEP.

**Participating families.** The participating prekindergarten students were diverse with regard to race and ethnicity: 35% White, 28% Latino, and 22% African American. Most (57%) were from families that had annual incomes of $30,000 or less; 55% had annual incomes at or below 150% of the federal poverty income guidelines. Maternal education varied, with the largest proportion reporting high school (41%) as their highest education level. Seventeen percent did not finish high school. English was the most frequently reported home language (86%); however, Spanish was also frequently spoken at home (26%). Some language other than English or Spanish was reported by 5% of households. Table 2 presents additional demographic information on the sample broken down by race and poverty status. The differences are consistent with census data for these groups. In general, the poor have less income, more children, and larger households. Within the same poverty status groups, Whites have larger household incomes than African Americans and Latinos. Table 2 presents the racial composition of the schools by the child’s race or ethnicity. These data suggest that segregation by race or ethnicity is the prevailing experience of children even in pre-K. Children attend programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial composition of school</th>
<th>Race of child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Black</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Latino</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of White</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mostly with children of their own race or ethnic group, even though these are public-supported programs.

**Measures**

**Socioemotional competence.** Socioemotional competence was assessed using parent and teacher questionnaires. The socioemotional competence indicators are derived from the Teacher–Child Rating Scale (TCRS; Hightower et al., 1986). All teachers and a sample of parents from Project 1 completed ratings of children’s socioemotional competence using a 5-point scale to rate the extent to which an item describes the child (not at all to very well). Total scale scores are the average of the ratings for the items making up that scale. Accordingly, the range of possible scale scores is 1–5. Items from the TCRS fall into the following dimensions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotion self-regulation</td>
<td>Ability to moderate emotional reactions to frustrations, limits, disappointments, failure, and teasing (Cronbach’s α = .90).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior self-regulation</td>
<td>Ability to moderate impulses and comply with rules and use of nonaggressive tactics to resolve conflicts (Cronbach’s α = .85).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social communication skills</td>
<td>Ability to express self, discuss thoughts, defend own ideas, question unfairness, and lead others (Cronbach’s α = .90).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relations (positive)</td>
<td>Ability to behave in an affable and friendly way that results in being popular and well liked by peers (Cronbach’s α = .85).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation with teacher</td>
<td>Capacity to form cooperative and emotionally close relations with teachers and other nonfamily adults (Cronbach’s α = .89).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 presents the zero-order correlations among the six socioemotional competence indicators. These indicators of socioemotional competence are significantly correlated with one another (p < .001). Self-regulation of emotions has the highest mean correlation with the other indicators. Self-regulation of emotions, adaptation to school, and peer relations have the highest average correlations with the other indicators, averaging above .5. These indicators share common variance, both because they tap into a common construct and because they are rated by the same person.

**Academic adjustment and achievement.**

**Language Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, 3rd edition (PPVT-III).** The PPVT-III (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) is a test of receptive vocabulary and has shown to relate other measures of language, literacy, and academic achievement (Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003; Dunn & Dunn, 1997). Children are shown a set of four pictures and are asked to select the picture that best represents the meaning of a word spoken by the examiner. A standard score is computed for this scale. According to the scale’s authors, the alpha coefficient of all the items on this scale range from .92 to .98, with a median reliability of .94.

**Woodcock–Johnson III Tests of Achievement: Sound Awareness-Rhyming subtest.** The W-J III Tests of Achievement Sound Awareness-Rhyming subtest (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001) measures the ability to rhyme, a subcategory of phonological awareness. The maximum possible on this scale is 17. The reliability coefficients for the 4- to 5-year-old age group range from .71 to .85, according to the measure’s authors.

**Math Woodcock–Johnson III Tests of Achievement: Applied Problems subtest.** The Woodcock–Johnson III Tests of Achievement (Woodcock et al., 2001) are well-established measures of academic achievement. The Applied Problems subtest of this standardized measure examines the ability to analyze and solve math problems. The reliability coefficients for the 3- to 5-year-old age group range from .92 to .94, according to the measure’s authors.

**Adjustment to school.** In addition to direct assessment of children’s academic skills, teachers were asked to rate students on their adjustment to the demands of the classroom setting. Specifically, these ratings assessed children’s academic focus and task orientation as indicated by being organized,
working independently, ignoring distractions, and completing work (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).

**Results**

**Correlations Between Indicators of Socioemotional Competence and School Adjustment**

Reports of social competence were obtained from teachers and parent reports. Teacher ratings of the social competence of boys were correlated with parents’ ratings of their children separately for Blacks, Latinos, and Whites and are presented in Table 3. The correlations were significant only for White boys. Simply stated, ratings of parents of BOC diverge from teachers in the assessment of their son’s social competence.

**Socioemotional competence by gender, poverty, and race or ethnicity.** The next set of analyses address the first question on the social competence of BOC. As noted earlier, teachers rated the items making up each dimension of socioemotional competence on a 5-point scale in which 4 or 5 indicated proficiency (Table 4). An average item rating of 3.5 or higher was used as the criterion for proficiency on a given dimension. Table 5 presents proportion of children meeting or exceeding the competence proficiency standard disaggregated by race or ethnicity and gender. Most BOC were rated proficient on self-regulation of behavior and on peer relations. Fewer were proficient in self-regulation of emotions. A similar pattern is seen for White boys.

Repeated-measures ANOVA in SPSS v18 was used to model changes in socioemotional competencies over the period from pre-K to kindergarten and determine whether the changes were associated with sex, race, poverty status, or their interactions. These multivariate analyses utilized sex (male, female), race (Black, Latino, White), and poverty status (nonpoor vs. poor) as independent variables. Three time points were analyzed: pre-K fall, pre-K spring, and kindergarten spring. Five dimensions of socioemotional competence and academic adaptation measured in fall of pre-K, spring of pre-K, and the spring of kindergarten were the dependent variables used in a repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance.

**Main effects of race, sex, and poverty on competence.** Table 6 presents the $F$-values for the main effects of gender, race, and poverty and their interactions. The factors most relevant to the research question on the status of socioemotional competence of BOC are the gender by race. This interaction was not significant for any of the socioemotional competence measures. The significant main effects for race, gender, and poverty were not germane to the research issues explored here but are interesting. Teachers rated girls as more competent than boys on every dimension. Poor children were significantly lower on emotion regulation, social communication skills, peer relations, and school adaptation than nonpoor children. Significant race or ethnicity differences were found for

### Table 4. Pearson Correlations Between Parent and Teacher Ratings of Socioemotional Competence by Race or Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black ($n = 45$)</th>
<th>Latino ($n = 37$)</th>
<th>White ($n = 82$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation emotions</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relations</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social communication</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. $^a p \leq .05$. $^b p \leq .001$.*

### Table 5. Percent of Children Rated as Proficient on Dimensions of Socioemotional Competence in the Spring of Pre-K by Gender and Race (Mean Rating > 3.5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black ($N = 278$)</td>
<td>Latino ($N = 347$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation emotions</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation behavior</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social communication</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relations</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6. $F$-values and Significance Levels for the Effects of Gender, Poverty, Time (From Fall of Pre-K to Spring of K), and Interactions on Socioemotional Competence Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Within-subjects effects</th>
<th>Between-subjects effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time (T)</td>
<td>Time × Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulation emotions</td>
<td>3.8$^a$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior dysregulation</td>
<td>3.17$^a$</td>
<td>3.2$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relations</td>
<td>16.8$^a$</td>
<td>3.0$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social communication</td>
<td>19.9$^a$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>2,611</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. A full factorial model was tested. Coefficients for nonsignificant effects are omitted from this table for the sake of clarity and efficiency of presentation. This includes race by sex, time by gender, time by poverty, and time by race by sex.

$^a p \leq .05$. $^b p \leq .01$. $^c p \leq .001$. 
emotion regulation and social communication skills, but the ethnic differences were not significant when family income was treated as a covariate. There was a significant poverty by race interaction for behavioral self-regulation and social communication skills.

**Change Over Time.** Table 6 shows that the effect for time was significant for all socioemotional competence indicators. Over the time from the beginning of pre-K to kindergarten, the entire sample experienced significant changes in teacher assessments of socioemotional competence. They evidence improvement in socioemotional competence ratings over the year in pre-K. However, these gains were not reflected in competence ratings by kindergarten teachers, and the group gave up the pre-K gains to such an extent that by the end of kindergarten, as a group, they were no longer judged on average to be competent on most dimensions of socioemotional competence. In fact, the kindergarten teachers rated the children below the proficiency threshold on all dimensions except relations with peers and teachers. Although the most typical pattern is a rise in competence from the fall of pre-K to the spring and a decline from pre-K to the end of kindergarten, this is not the case for emotion regulation, for which the upward trend in pre-K is continued in kindergarten.

**Development by Race and by Ethnicity.** The interactions most relevant to our concerns about development of socioemotional competence in BOC are gender by race by time and gender by race by time by poverty. None of these interactions was significant. This suggests that socioemotional competence of BOC in the early years develops along a similar trajectory as that of White boys. For both boys and girls, there is a gradual increase over the pre-K year and a decrease over the transition to kindergarten.

Also to be noted in Table 6 are the significant interactions for race or ethnicity by change over time for behavioral regulation and peer relations. Figure 1 represents the race by change interaction for behavior regulation. Whites and Latinos declined over the pre-K year but improve back to slightly above the level at which they began in pre-K. Black boys and girls begin pre-K slightly lower than Whites and Latinos but improve steadily over time to a level not significantly different from the other two groups. Figure 2 presents the interaction for peer relations. It shows that White and Latino boys and girls are virtually constant over the pre-K to kindergarten period, but that Blacks improve in pre-K and decline in kindergarten. Figure 3 presents the race or ethnicity interaction for adaptation to school. In this figure, we see the typical pattern of improvements in pre-K followed by declines in kindergarten. Rates of decline for White and Latino boys are such that the gap that existed at the start of pre-K closes entirely by the end of kindergarten (Table 7).

**Relationship of Socioemotional Competence With Academic Functioning**

Correlations were computed to assess the relationship of socioemotional competence at the end of pre-K with three achievement indicators, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary, the
Woodcock–Johnson Applied Problems, and the Woodcock–Johnson Word Attack at the end of kindergarten. Because of the high correlations among the socioemotional competence variables, only three with the smallest intercorrelations were used: self-regulation of emotions, social communication, and peer relations. These were done separately for Black, Latino, and White boys. For Latino boys, there were no significant correlations between socioemotional competence and vocabulary, math, or emergent reading. For Black boys, emotion regulation was correlated with math ($r = .25, p < .05$), and social communication was correlated with emergent reading ($r = .26, p < .05$). For White boys, there were many significant relations. Self-regulation of emotions was significantly correlated with vocabulary ($r = .15, p < .05$) and math ($r = .22, p < .01$). Peer relations were significantly correlated with vocabulary ($r = .29, p < .01$) and math ($r = .15, p < .01$).

Separate regression models were computed using socioemotional competence variables at the end of pre-K as independent variables to predict school adjustment, learning difficulties, and vocabulary and math achievement in kindergarten. Self-regulation of emotions was a significant predictor of school adjustment, learning difficulties, and math. Social communication skills predicted vocabulary and math. Self-regulation of behavior and peer relations were not predictive of academic functioning in kindergarten.

### Discussion

This research was designed to address gaps in our knowledge of the socioemotional competence of BOC. The focus on competence and its growth provide a window onto positive aspects of the development of BOC, who are often at risk of difficulty because of ethnicity, gender, and poverty. A primary motivation was to understand the level and development of socioemotional competence among BOC beginning in pre-K. This work began with an assumption that BOC growing up in poverty occupy a social niche that is especially risky for adverse social outcomes and that the effects of the risks emanating from gender, race, and poverty would be cumulative. Not only do the results fail to support the assumption of cumulative risk, they call into question assertions and fears that BOC come to school burdened by socioemotional issues that hamper success at school. Instead, the results suggest that the socioemotional development of BOC occurs along similar lines as that of White boys. On an absolute basis, a high proportion of boys met or exceeded the criterion for proficiency. Latino and Black boys were especially high on relations with peers and teachers. However, they were less likely to be rated proficient on self-regulation of emotion. This pattern suggests that boys may be affable and endearing to the extent that they are well liked and popular by others but may be emotionally immature and lagging behind in the self-regulatory skills that undergird adaptation to the demands of schooling, which require focus on and completion of work in spite of distractions or tempting alternatives. Consistent with prior research, girls mature earlier and are better able to accommodate the demands of schooling. Girls had significantly higher levels of socioemotional competence than boys. This was true in every domain.

### The Kindergarten Transition Effect

Wherever it is that BOC verge onto a different and more risky social competence trajectory, it is not at the start of school. There are some hints of difficulty arising by kindergarten. In contrast to the growth observed during the pre-K year, declines are observed over the kindergarten year. The gains children make in socioemotional competence scores are wiped out in kindergarten to the extent that, on many domains measured in this study, children ended kindergarten at about the same level they had attained when they started preschool. Is this a sign of behavioral and emotional regression? Probably not. A more likely explanation is that the maturity demands, the environmental requirements, and the tasks, rules, and behavioral expectations are more challenging in kindergarten than what children experienced in pre-K. Children may have benefited significantly from the freer, child-focused, and developmentally sensitive classrooms in pre-K and were less able to cope with the less flexible and teacher-directed approaches they encountered in kindergarten. This may offer a strong argument in support of reform efforts to model the early primary grade more closely to high-quality pre-K classrooms. Boys may benefit from a slower transition to high teacher-directed environment. Children’s social skills may not have declined, but the criterion for a rating of proficient is higher. Most children eventually accommodate to the increased demands. However, there are many who struggle with the social demands in ways that may adversely affect their response to academic challenges. Difficulty in the socioemotional arena interferes with their ability to adjust to and benefit from...
instruction. This has important implications for BOC, because they are often overrepresented in the children struggling with the transition to primary school. Should efforts be expended to increase child compliance and in token economies and positive rewards or should we devote our attention to ways to accommodate classroom practices that ease the transitions of children who struggle? Recall that the rationale for the introduction of the kindergarten year was to provide an easier shift from preschool and home as learning through play to school as learning through intentional instruction. However, the original goal is being lost in the face of pressures to improve the academic performance of young children resulting in kindergartens that look and are structured more like first grade than the transitional year they were intended to be. The P-3 movement is proposing important reforms that attempt to address the problem of transition by integrating developmentally appropriate practices throughout the early primary school years, aligning the learning standards, and easing the transition for children by extending it over more years. This effort is likely to be a special benefit to BOC who are struggling in kindergarten and first grade with parallel issues of social and academic competence. This speculation about the suppressive effects of kindergarten on socioemotional development needs to be confirmed by investigation of boys at later points in school after kindergarten.

**Relationship of Socioemotional Learning With Academic Functioning**

For White children, there was a strong relationship between socioemotional learning and academic competence. For Black and Latino children, this relationship was weak to nonexistent. Why? This difference suggests that Black and Latino children may have high levels of socioemotional competence even though they may not yet be doing well with early language and math skills. The divergence of language and social skills may be the consequence of differences between home and school language for both Latino and Black children. Moreover, their experiences at home and in preschool may have emphasized and been effective in transmitting social skills but gave less emphasis to language and higher order thinking skills because those were seen by families as the province of schools and teachers (Barbarin et al., 2008).

**Nonequivalence of Measures by Race or Ethnicity**

Reliance primarily on teachers’ ratings to gauge socioemotional competence is a limitation of the study that must be taken seriously. This is an especially salient issue in the case of Black boys who tend to be viewed and rated more negatively by teachers (Zimmerman, Khoury, Vega, Gil, & Warheit, 1995). Comparing teachers’ ratings of students to those of parents represented one effort to detect that possible bias in our data. In this study, teachers’ ratings were significantly related to parents’ ratings on every dimension for White children but not for children of color. This bias appears to have affected the intercept of competence ratings rather than the slope, because the slopes were very similar for all groups on most measures. The most striking differences occurred for ratings of children’s emotional self-regulation. Whether these differences are soft signs of bias or reflect real differences in parents’ and teachers’ experiences with the child is difficult to discern. Teachers of Black children reported a less close relationship with their students than did teachers of White and Latino children. It is conceivable that because of the relative lack of closeness, teachers were less sensitive to the children, less able to anticipate when a child was getting emotionally aroused, and therefore less effective as a resource than parents in helping children to regulate emotional arousal. Although this is a less optimal situation for Black children, it may reflect the reality that they face in the classroom.

What are the implications of these results for the inclusion of SEL as part of school curricula? They are clear on the grounds of the need of a large minority of children who lack proficiency in self-regulation and interpersonal skills. Although most children are proficient, there are a large number who could benefit from SEL curricula, especially those elements focused on self-regulation and communication. Moreover, policy makers and teaching staff who worry that taking time for these will divert students from the instructional time they sorely need for literacy and math can find solace in the data linking SEL to academic skills. Increases in socioemotional competence are likely to help students make better use of the time devoted to academic instruction. This benefit is likely to occur through a lowering of school adjustment problems and strengthening motivation and school engagement. SEL can be a universal intervention that helps all children regardless of gender and ethnicity.

**Keywords:** boys of color (BOC); African American boys; Latino boys; socioemotional learning; socioemotional competence; academic achievement; self-regulation; poverty; kindergarten; pre-K; peer relations; relations with teachers

**References**


