We are IntechOpen,
the world's leading publisher of
Open Access books
Built by scientists, for scientists

6,900
Open access books available

186,000
International authors and editors

200M
Downloads

Our authors are among the

154
Countries delivered to

TOP 1%
most cited scientists

12.2%
Contributors from top 500 universities

CLARIVATE ANALYTICS
BOOK CITATION INDEX
INDEXED

WEB OF SCIENCE™

Selection of our books indexed in the Book Citation Index
in Web of Science™ Core Collection (BKCI)

Interested in publishing with us?
Contact book.department@intechopen.com

Numbers displayed above are based on latest data collected.
For more information visit www.intechopen.com

Promoting the Social Competence of Each and Every Child in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms

Adam S. Kennedy

Abstract

Social competence is part of a complex system that extends beyond the young child, necessitating prevention, assessment, and intervention. In this chapter, social competence in early childhood is examined considering existing research, developmental theory, and best practices and policies, many of which (on their own) address limited facets of a complex set of interactive competencies and outcomes. The potential and pitfalls of inclusive early childhood classroom structures relative to supporting interaction and social skill development are explored. Next, some of the most common social issues related to disabilities are described. These include deficits associated with specific developmental issues, such as emotional and behavioral issues autism, as well as others covered under the federal law (IDEA); universal practices for understanding and addressing student strengths and needs are shared. Finally, structures for addressing social interaction and supporting social competence in inclusive classrooms are presented. A conceptual model integrating professional preparation and the key components of inclusive preschool education for children with social competence needs is shared. These serve to illustrate practices and strategies which are supported by extant literature and acknowledge the dignity of children and their need for effective early childhood educational practices.

Keywords: preschool, inclusion, social skills, social competence, peer interaction

1. Introduction

Social competence is a term covering a variety of diverse internal factors and external behaviors that influence the likelihood and quality of social interaction. *Competence* implies an overall level of success in social interaction as it occurs in the contexts of daily life. The term has broad applications and encompasses many complex developmental factors, rendering most brief definitions simplistic. For example, the terms social skills and social competence are frequently been used interchangeably, but social competence has been conceptualized as a broader dimension comprised of not only social skills but also the neurological, temperamental, and environmental factors that both help and hinder social skill development and application [1, 2]. Social competence is experienced by the child but often judged by others: peers, teachers, and parents. The relationship between social competence and

a variety of positive outcomes, such as success in school, has been well-documented. Social competence enables children to interact with peers in a variety of ways and contexts and to maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, both of which are critical for success in school and beyond. A significant amount of research into social competence in young children has identified negative consequences associated with social competence deficits.

In this chapter, the role of the early childhood educator in positively influencing the social competence of preschool children is explored. Specifically, the considerations, practices, and evidence bases for social competence teaching strategies and interventions in inclusive environments are emphasized. First, social competence is defined, and its importance to early childhood development is explored. Then, the impact of disabilities on social skills is touched upon. Universal considerations for preschool educators are presented, highlighting parallels between best early childhood education practices and those which form a foundation for proactively addressing social competence. Next, specific strategies and interventions to address social skills are shared. The chapter concludes with a model integrating these practices into a framework for addressing social competence in preschool that emphasizes strongly the role of the educator.

2. Importance of social competence in early childhood

In early childhood, play very often represents the context for the learning and expression of social behavior. A preschool-aged child's social competence among same-aged peers can be conceptualized according to what takes place as children interact—in other words, how children initiate, sustain, and maintain a level of positive interaction or cooperation—as well as how they resolve interpersonal conflicts. While such a conceptualization focuses on an important sequence of typical events in the preschool classroom, it is also an oversimplification of this complex construct. Each of these components might involve many discrete social skills as well as underlying reading of social cues and situations. *Social skills* include the discrete behaviors that make up or contribute to one's social competence, such as entering play, taking turns, making requests, etc.; many such skills are appropriate across a wide range of settings but must be understood and applied in context-specific ways. A given play context could also require a child to use social language, read of social cues, and demonstrate positive initiations and responses, as well as share, negotiate play roles, respond to aggression, and exchange ideas. In classroom contexts, social competence also includes behaving in accordance with classroom rules, displaying helping behaviors, and cooperating with adults during structured and semi-structured learning activities [3].

As a result, many early childhood programs consider social-emotional development and its associated skills as critical components of the preschool curriculum. Whether or not extensive planned opportunities to learn social skills are planned, in a high-quality preschool classroom, adults engage in play-based learning activities alongside preschoolers, so the social problem-solving which occurs during play is critical for children to reap the developmental benefits that early education provides. Developing social competence and demonstrating positive relationships before children reach kindergarten not only enable children to approach a healthy trajectory of social–emotional development (by providing children with friends *and* friendships as an additional learning context) but also enhance early adjustment and achievement in kindergarten and beyond [4].

What are these critical skills, and how do they operate and interact to produce social competence? First, it is critical to consider social competence within
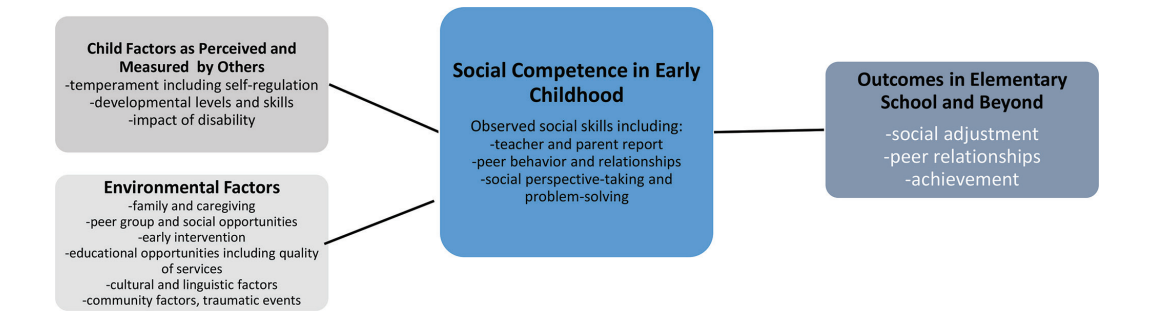
Figure 1.
Model of internal and external influences on social competence in early childhood [1, 2].

the context of each child's broader ecological system. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, observed social competence (inevitably appraised by others) is the result of interaction between intra-child factors (such as brain development, temperament, self-regulation, and current developmental skills—including the impact of disability) and extra-child factors (caregiving, quality of learning environment and instruction, cultural and linguistic considerations). The interaction of these factors, as well as *how they are perceived by others*, is what determines longer-term outcomes in early childhood and beyond through the consequences of friendship vs. isolation, cooperative vs. independent play, rewards and acknowledgement from others vs. the use of punitive disciplinary practices, and access to vs. separation from the general education curriculum.

The importance of others' perceptions must not be underestimated, as these can create an environment of advantage or risk for children. For example, if a teacher is unfamiliar with the cultures of her students' families, she may at best fail to address a critical realm of assets and needs and at worst categorize behaviors or preferences that are normal for children as somehow "problematic." Likewise, if teachers are inexperienced in working with children with exceptionalities, they may be more likely to stereotype children or lower developmental expectations based upon their biases. The importance of perception can also be illustrated through social skills assessment (whether through systematic observation or norm- or curriculum-referenced checklists, all of which are frequently used in preschool). Teachers and caregivers may judge a child's social-emotional development or competence quite differently simply because of typical differences between the school and home environments. These differences can be more effectively explored and understood when teachers form positive, collaborative relationships with caregivers. In this case, the educator is more likely to better understand how a child's system of intra- and extra-child factors interact and make better instructional decisions.

Within this system, many specific social skills are learned and employed by the child. Examples of skills associated with later success in school include initiation/sustaining social interaction, in addition to getting along with others, following directions, emotional self-regulation, solving typical social problems in ways deemed appropriate by others, and persisting through social challenges [5]. Focusing on these areas as a teacher not only helps individual children improve and develop them but may also improve the social environment of the classroom as a whole, providing a more developmentally appropriate learning environment for all children.

2.1 Children with disabilities and unique learning needs

Helping young children to develop positive social skills and relationships is a critical responsibility for early childhood educators. This is particularly important

for children with disabilities. At this point in time, however, the state of preschool in the United States paints a grim picture of the quality, appropriateness, and inclusiveness of classrooms in relation to children's social and behavioral challenges. With thousands of preschool children suspended or expelled each year (on average, 250 per day), preschool programs wield punitive disciplinary actions at a rate higher than at any other level of education—up to three times the rate of K-12 in pre-K and as high as 13 times the K-12 rate in child care for 3- to 4-year-olds [6]. A portion of the explanation for such disturbing statistics lies in a failure of the system of early childhood education (including preparation programs, administrators/policy makers) to fulfill its obligation to support teachers in playing an active role in understanding and influencing the complex system illustrated in **Figure 1**. A lack of cultural responsiveness or awareness of bias, insufficient focus on developing relationships with families and children, a lack of supportive services or interventions, and a low investment in professional development and increasing the status, licensure, and compensation of early childhood educators are all relevant issues.

In the end, the greatest influence on the success of young children in early childhood education is the educator himself/herself. The misinterpretation, rejection, and punishment of children with disabilities or developmental differences in the absence of inclusivity, supports, and developmentally appropriate interventions represent one of the key social justice issues of the field of early childhood education, particularly at a time when the majority of children under five do not have access to early childhood education programs to begin with. While these are clearly systemic issues affecting educators and not originally created by them, in many ways the teacher still holds the key to healthy, developmentally supportive, and inclusive classrooms.

For a variety of reasons, many children fail to adequately develop key social skills, thus lowering their overall competence and placing them at risk for punitive discipline and failure in school. In particular, children with disabilities experience peer rejection at a higher rate and are much more likely to miss out on highly impactful social experiences with peers. This may be a result of differences between their social and play skills and those of typical same-aged peers and will worsen with time in the absence of high-quality instruction and/or support. Examples of such differences that are observable from a very young age (some behaviors present by infancy) include lower rates of social initiation, positive social behavior, appropriate responses, a higher rate of more disruptive entry to play activities and problematic behavior, and poorer turn-taking skills [7]. As a result, young children with special needs experience a high rate of social rejection, i.e., social isolation and rejection of play initiations [8].

Differences and deficits in social competence in preschool-aged children are evident in children with many different types of needs (including autism, speech/language disorders, cognitive disabilities, and emotional and behavior issues, and developmental delay), as well as in children who placed at risk as a result of poverty, abuse, or engagement with child welfare agencies. Young children with disabilities tend to play with others less frequently and have fewer conversations than their typical peers; they may also lose social skills more quickly if teachers do not acknowledge these and encourage their consistent use [9]. As a result, such children are presented with fewer natural opportunities to develop and test out their social skills. For example, if it takes a particular child twice the number of peer interactions to learn an important skill (such as imitating and expanding on a peer's play), but she has only half the opportunities due to isolation from or rejection by peers or adults, serious consequences for her social development may result.

3. Foundational responsibilities of preschool educators

Ensuring that the preschool classroom provides effective, systematic, and developmentally appropriate instruction to support children's social competence requires collaborative planning, instruction that is informed by assessment, and targeted strategies that are implemented throughout the year. All of these dimensions of instruction must be provided in a high-quality learning environment that is inclusive of all children and supported by teaming and professional development.

3.1 Sustaining culture vs. acknowledging diversity

A first step in effectively addressing social competence involves reaffirming one's commitment to the inherent inclusiveness of the field of early childhood education. Developmentally appropriate practices, or DAP, as defined by the NAEYC place a high value on the developmental knowledge of teachers and their understanding of the milestones and key goals of the preschool years [10]. But instructional decision-making involves two other components which are intended to hold equal weight in determining the extent to which one's teaching practices are developmentally appropriate. First, educators must consider a child's individual interests, abilities, and developmental progress. Subsequent planning must take into account the inside out factors included in **Figure 1** at an individual level—in other words, planning for the interests of young children is not sufficient and is not considered developmentally appropriate practice unless the interests and needs of each and every child are considered and integrated. NAEYC's guidelines also stress that educators must consider what is culturally important to children and families, thus supporting their belief systems and practices. This does not mean that the classroom must mirror the home but rather that teachers (particularly when their backgrounds differ from those of the children they teach) examine the ways in which their backgrounds and biases influence their teaching aim to develop more empathetic, trusting relationships with children and families [11]. It is from these relationships that more meaningful antibias materials, activities, and teaching practices must be embedded, rather than through simply acknowledging diversity. This way preschool educators are more likely to begin the work of sustaining children's and families' culture rather than simply acknowledging it [12]. Culturally sustaining practices reject the notion that family culture can be subsumed or subordinated within a classroom or school culture and are actually reflected in NAEYC's DAPs which state the families should partner in curriculum planning and child assessment (see [10]). These guidelines are much more inclusive of diverse children and families than many educators may realize.

3.2 Acknowledging the effectiveness of inclusive models and commitment to the LRE

In one sense, the majority of programs serving preschool-aged children already have an inclusive structure. Head Start programs are required to serve a proportion of children with disabilities, just as they are children from households considered low income, and preschool programs funded by states must serve children aged 3–5 with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Diversity is the everyday reality of the preschool classroom, and many of the practices that support successful inclusion also support not only children with disabilities but also those who require support to develop social competence in preschool. They include [13]:

- Responsive instructional practices, aligned with DAP's three principles, which respond to children's interests, motivation, and lives outside the classroom

- Proactive environmental and instructional accommodations which ensure the access to and understanding of the curriculum for children with widely varying strengths, needs, and approaches to learning

- Classroom communities that actively support cooperation through explicit and responsive teaching of skills with value beyond isolated classroom situations

- Classroom activities that involve heterogenous grouping, jointly planned and including the input of all key members of the early childhood program community

When children with identified disabilities are included in the preschool classroom, these four sets of practices provide a strong supportive context for better inclusiveness of the classroom as a whole and for addressing individual needs. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its subsequent amendments mandate services for children aged 3–5 with disabilities within the least restrictive environment (LRE), which is defined as the educational environment as close to where nondisabled same-aged peers would be served as possible. In states where this results in a higher percentage of children with disabilities in general education classrooms for the majority of the time, the use of punitive disciplinary measures is lower. This means that collaboration to further the inclusive aims of IDEA through the classroom practices described above further provides a potentially direct remedy to the social justice issue of excessive suspension and expulsion of preschoolers.

4. Addressing social competence in inclusive classrooms

Instructional strategies for addressing social competence include embedding the teaching of social skills in each day's classroom routines and activities, as well as more explicit teaching of specific skills. Common social skills emphasized in early childhood curricula include those presented in **Table 1** below [14].

4.1 Embedded teaching

An initial step to addressing social competence in the preschool classroom includes identifying the skills that most children need to work on and ensuring that universal teaching strategies address these throughout the day. For children who require additional support or a greater number of opportunities to work on a particular skill, embedded teaching provides a framework for planning (e.g., [15]). Embedded teaching involves examining the daily routine and its varied learning activities and identifying wherein specific group or individualized outcomes may be addressed. In this sense, it combines accommodations for diverse children and targeted teaching strategies within a naturalistic approach that does not require significant individualized intervention or time away from the other priorities of teaching to accomplish. For instance, a teacher might intentionally model and teach skills such as requesting, questioning, commenting, and sharing while partnering with children in pretend play in the house area based upon the needs of particular children there and because that center provides a meaningful context within which to embed the teaching of those skills. In this sense, the teacher takes advantage of

Skill area	Social skills
Emotional understanding and empathy	Communicating emotions to others
	Expressing emotions in adaptive ways
	Recognizing that one's actions affect others
	Acknowledging and responding to others emotions
Initiation of play	Initiating social interactions
	Entering others' play
	Responding to the initiations or invitations of others
	Managing impulses through self-control
Maintaining social interaction	Turn-taking
	Engaging in parallel play
	Making attempts at cooperative play
Social problem-solving	Coping with the inevitability of limited resources (e.g., materials/manipulatives)
	Communicating a social problem
	Cooperating in talking through a social problem
	Accepting and acting upon potential solutions to social problems
	Making choices that defuse or prevent conflict

Table 1.
Social skills emphasized in the preschool classroom.

these natural opportunities, acknowledges children who use these behaviors, and narrates intentionally to highlight their presence and importance. The teacher then may help younger peers who do not yet demonstrate those social skills to respond positively and to perhaps attempt the skills themselves with support. Everyday routines such as meals and snack times present another set of natural opportunities within which to embed the teaching of social skills such as greeting, conversational turn-taking, requesting and saying "thank you." Mealtimes also offer an opportunity to address and normalize children's varied cultural practices in relation to food. In inclusive classrooms, teachers systematize the identification and use of these natural opportunities, while also identifying skills for which more explicit lessons or activities may be needed. Note that in embedded teaching, the center/routine/ activity may lend itself to certain forms of social interaction, but the teacher engages in active planning to both maximize the benefit of these opportunities and make room for additional ones. While this does require flexibility and in-the-moment responsiveness, it also requires that teachers (a) recognize key group and individual social-emotional needs, (b) understand that children in the naturally occurring and planned groups of the preschool day (as opposed to children who seem to be isolated or independent) will benefit from embedded teaching, (c) proactively plan across the daily routine, and (d) consider and select the best ways to deliver social supports within a variety of contexts. In this sense, it goes beyond intentional interaction because it is both targeted and preplanned.

4.2 Explicit teaching

Our understanding of the benefits of social competence and the risks associated with a lack of it is generally better understood than the use of supports and teaching strategies in the preschool classroom. While a variety of curricula, activities, assessment tools, and intervention strategies have been developed, none of them have an evidence base that encompasses the diversity of children, families, program models, or unique learning needs/disabilities preschool educators must navigate. Widely adopted early childhood curricula (such as The Creative Curriculum) and approaches (such as HighScope) include social-emotional goals, objectives, and/or indicators

(i.e., specific skills) that can guide instruction in preschool classrooms. The explicit instruction of these skills takes many different forms. In The Creative Curriculum, teaching activities include what could be called embedded teaching focusing on social-emotional goals and objectives in children's play at various classroom centers. However, specific guidelines as to how to teach particular skills are lacking. In the HighScope approach, social and emotional indicators are assessed and planned for, and a hierarchy of strategies to support child-directed active learning is included. In addition, a specific model for intervening and supporting children to problem-solve through common conflicts is provided. It does, however, rely upon the existing skills of children to navigate its complex steps, which can take years to master.

Identifying high-leverage social skill instructional approaches within these approaches is challenging at best, as teaching strategies are typically employed within their curriculum frameworks. While evidence suggests that both of the approaches mentioned above demonstrate some effectiveness in improving overall developmental outcomes for young children, an evidence base for specific teaching strategies within those approaches is lacking. Nevertheless, certain commonalities across these approaches can be identified, representing a survey of common "best" practices. These include:

- *Direct instruction*. In classrooms where explicit teaching is used, teachers must (a) ensure that they address all of the types of critical early childhood social skills, including emotional understanding/empathy, initiation of play, maintaining interactions, and social problem-solving; (b) teach through the use of concrete and observable examples to which young children can relate; (c) integrate the skill across the curriculum, including making connections to literature wherever possible; (d) ensure that the skill is comprehensible and meaningful and involves behaviors that young children can successfully enact; (e) provide extensive opportunities for children to practice the skill in the context of natural activities within which the skills have a high likelihood of enhancing relationships and perceived competence; and(d) provide continuous support (through both feedback and encouragement) to children as they attempt these skills.

- *Social skill mini-lessons*. This involves teaching children specific social behaviors, such as taking turns or requesting toys from adults/peers, as children begin center-based activities or play. This instruction can occur at classroom centers (such as the block or art area) themselves or be delivered to the whole group prior to initiating such activities. Mini-lessons are often used to address situations that emerge throughout the week or during a unit in response to or to address anticipated issues that arise from, say, limited materials at a center or the entry of a new child to the classroom. Typically, teachers will use this type of approach to supplement more explicit instruction or as a substitute when time or other resources do not allow for a more systematic approach.

- *Behavioral supports*. Here, teachers utilize behavioral learning in order to increase the frequency of socially competent behavior, decrease problematic or aggressive behavior, and shape emerging social skills in context. Behavioral supports include prompting, contingent natural reinforcement, and redirection. These behavioral supports can be provided in conjunction with explicit instruction or be utilized in response to ongoing observation and classroom assessment. Behavioral prompts given to young children should be clear and concise, and wherever possible teachers should model desired social skills.

Contingent natural reinforcement can come in the form of narration combined with positive reinforcement (e.g., "Martie shared her crayons with you; Martie, you are sharing nicely with your friends"). Such reinforcement should be specific (as opposed to "good job" or "that is so nice"), clearly identifying the child's social skill. In this way, the reinforcement should evolve as the behavior evolves. Over time, these prompts can be faded or be replaced with more developmentally appropriate/specific ones. Redirection can also be used when children require more specific information about what to do or what social choices are available to them.

- *Monitoring with narration and problem-posing.* Here, teachers observe children as they interact, providing narration of both their play and of its social-emotional landscape, highlighting feelings, themes, and behaviors of which they would like children to increase their awareness. These are also valuable instances where teachers can infuse feelings vocabulary and pose ideas or problems for children to explore, e.g., "I wonder what might happen if you ask him to let you join." It is in contexts such as this that sets of strategies such as the HighScope problem-solving approach to conflict resolution would fit nicely, as this approach is designed to be implemented as children's play and interactions call for it—in other words, when conflicts occur.

In context, strategies such as these can effectively dovetail with the teaching of many other skills in the preschool classroom, and they can be particularly necessary in inclusive classrooms where the input, support, and prompting of the teacher may be necessary in order for interaction to occur (or occur successfully). Preschool educators should keep in mind that teacher-directed and structured activities to address social skills represent only one aspect of a healthy learning environment where positive relationships and a sense of community are developed. Explicit instruction of social skills works best in classrooms where children are offered a sufficient amount of freedom and choice and where activities and materials emphasize shared control between adults and children.

Where children with disabilities are present, a single approach certainly will not meet the needs of all children. Many children with disabilities benefit from basic classroom accommodations and seek out social interaction with peers, while other children may need more specialized, individualized social skill supports provided by their individualized education plan (IEP) teams, including special education professionals. Preschool educators must understand children as individuals rather than as members of a perceived disability category. By observing such children, learning their interests, preferences, and sources of motivation, as well as their experience/degree of success in social interaction and more informed decisions, can be made as to how children with disabilities will respond to existing practices and whether more targeted social skills interventions may be necessary. But it is always better for such interventions to be delivered within positive nurturing relationships with skilled and understanding adults who appreciate that social competence is part of a complex ecological system rather than simply a characteristic of children to be simplistically judged by others.

5. Interventions to address social skills

In diverse preschool classrooms, play-based learning and social relationships form an important piece of the foundation of social development and influence later

academic achievement. At the same time, the consequences of disabilities in early childhood and/or insufficient or inappropriate social behavior destabilize that foundation. Over time, these differences and deficits predict negative outcomes such as emotional and behavior problems, disciplinary action, and school dropout. In other words, the social and behavioral challenges faced by many children with disabilities worsen over time in the absence of intervention. In this sense, social competence interventions may be viewed as essential forms of both intervention and prevention.

Interventions of various types are available to improve social skills in early childhood, including increasing the frequency and quality of specific skills and enhancing social pragmatic skills (which include both the verbal and nonverbal behaviors associated with interactive and cooperative play). What remains to determine is whether these interventions produce effects across contexts that are long-lasting and that make an impact on meaningful social behaviors and social competence rather than simply increasing the instance of isolated skills. Studies examining these factors are greatly needed, as well as ones that include the perspectives of peers and caregivers within a more context-specific model of social competence.

Social skill interventions generally fall into one of four categories: systematic arrangement of the classroom environment, behavioral strategies, instructional approaches, and combined approaches (which utilize elements of two or more of the above). These interventions share many features with the universal instructional strategies discussed earlier in this chapter. What distinguishes interventions from such strategies is a set of practices that includes (a) predetermined decisions about the frequency, intensity, and duration of the intervention; (b) a matching of the intervention to identified individual or group needs; (c) the use of assessment tools to establish skill performance levels and track progress; (d) goals identified either from individual children's IEPs or by analyzing data on current levels of performance. Interventions ideally also have an evidence base supporting their use; however, preschool teachers frequently do not have either the resources or the preparation necessary to access and evaluate such evidence. Interventions may also be embedded into multitiered systems of support (discussed later in this chapter).

Systematic arrangement of the classroom environment, sometimes referred to as environmental arrangements [16] or structured play, is a means of more effectively facilitating social interaction (e.g., altering the size, arrangement, or materials at a center to perhaps facilitate more cooperative play). Such strategies are the lowest intensity form of social competence intervention, and virtually no evidence base exists in the literature verify their effectiveness. However, environmental arrangement is an important consideration for educators as they design more direct and intensive interventions.

Behavioral strategies again use cues, prompts, and positive reinforcement to increase interactive social and play behaviors. As part of a systematic intervention strategy, they can be effective in increasing the social behavior of children with autism spectrum disorder. They can involve peers and occur across contexts, allowing for greater generalization. An example of a behavioral intervention might involve peers in increasing opportunities for target children's interactive play. Peers are positively reinforced for following through on-stated plans for social play that include choosing target children as playmates. A key consideration in behavioral strategies is that they are usually focused on specific behaviors, while the context of social competence is quite complex. Careful monitoring is essential to ensure that behavioral strategies are part of a systematic approach that increases desired behaviors, decreases undesirable ones, and addresses competence as a whole. As an example, an intervention that focuses on initiations may be successful in getting children to interact, but without focusing on the complexities of maintaining

positive interactions, such interventions, can lead to increased conflict among children without consistent adult monitoring and attention to additional social competence dimensions.

Instructional approaches include any intervention involving the direct instruction of children in specific skills such as sharing, helping others, and initiating social interaction (e.g., [17, 18]). These preschool social competence interventions have the strongest evidence base for children with special needs and involve teacher-led social skill activities followed by supported play. In other words, using a variety of strategies, teachers help children to learn and master the skills, including offering support during the times when children have natural opportunities to use them. In some cases, teachers may directly teach social behaviors (such as greetings or requests for toys) and then follow up during play. For example, at circle time, a teacher and children sing a new song about inviting others to play. She then follows the children into the learning centers, watches and listens as some children try this new behavior, and supports children who are playing alone, but seem ready to learn to invite a friend to join them. Some children might respond to a prompt; others might need the teacher to model what to say and do. Such adult-mediated instructionally-based social competence interventions can have a significant positive effect on the social competence of young children with special needs when offered in naturalistic settings. Given that instructional approaches are the most widely studied and that these may be integrated into existing classroom activities across a wide variety of settings, the potential for their utility in inclusive classrooms is great.

The use of social skill interventions with preschool-aged children is well supported in published research, with a variety of programs showing a positive impact on specific skills in both specialized and inclusive settings. Some of the positive outcomes include increased social language and play initiations, and decreased maladaptive behavior, and increased overall competence as observed by adults. But while published research appears to indicate that these interventions have a generally positive relationship with various social skills and other behaviors associated with social competence, many questions regarding their impact on overall competence remain unanswered. The impact of social competence interventions has been found to vary across variables such as gender, age groups, risk factors, and disabilities. There are no consistent guidelines regarding intervention length and intensity, type of interventionist, treatment integrity, and presence of follow-up. Few of these variables have been explored sufficiently.

What remains to debate is whether these interventions produce effects *across contexts that are long-lasting and that make an impact on meaningful forms of social behavior and relationships*. Studies examining these factors are greatly needed, as well as ones that include the perspectives of peers and caregivers within a more comprehensive and culturally situated model of competence. Generalization and maintenance are also areas of missed opportunity and have not been sufficiently addressed in this body of research, as most social skill intervention studies do not follow children over time, across settings, or view competence multidimensionally as opposed to assessing specific behaviors or short-term adult perceptions.

6. Integrative models for promoting preschool social competence

Social competence can be integrated into multitiered systems of support [19] that (a) organize common approaches as classroom-wide (universal), naturalistic

(targeted), and explicit (intensive) [20]. Considering available interventions through this three-tiered lens is an essential step in aligning practice with the federal law. Some include social skill curricula as a universal intervention at the first of three tiers of support. Other approaches such as the Pyramid Model [21, 22], which is now in use in 29 of the United States, offer a comprehensive model including coaching and professional development effectiveness in both increasing social skills and addressing behaviors that interfere with preschool children's learning and relationships. The Pyramid Model emphasizes professional development in evidence-based practices, as well as nurturing relationships and a healthy, developmentally appropriate classroom environment as the foundation of preschoolers' social-emotional development. This implementation of social-emotional supports and interventions represents the top levels of the pyramid, which was designed to complement the tiers of response-to-intervention models while adapting them to address the realities and needs of the field of early childhood education (including children under age three). Such models not only hold great promise in terms of positively influencing the social competence of children but also create networks of support, resources, professional development, and data that will continue to bear fruit as they are even more widely implemented.

Figure 2 is designed to place such models into context, as they address only part of a broader realm of need in the early childhood field. First and foremost, increasing the amount and depth of teacher preparation in this area is critical. Innovation in teacher education has moved from the university classroom to field-based preparation embedded in mutually beneficial partnerships with early childhood education programs, and it is in these field-based apprenticeships that the awareness, relationships, and practices to address preschool social competence must be learned and developed [23]. The merging of professional preparation and development
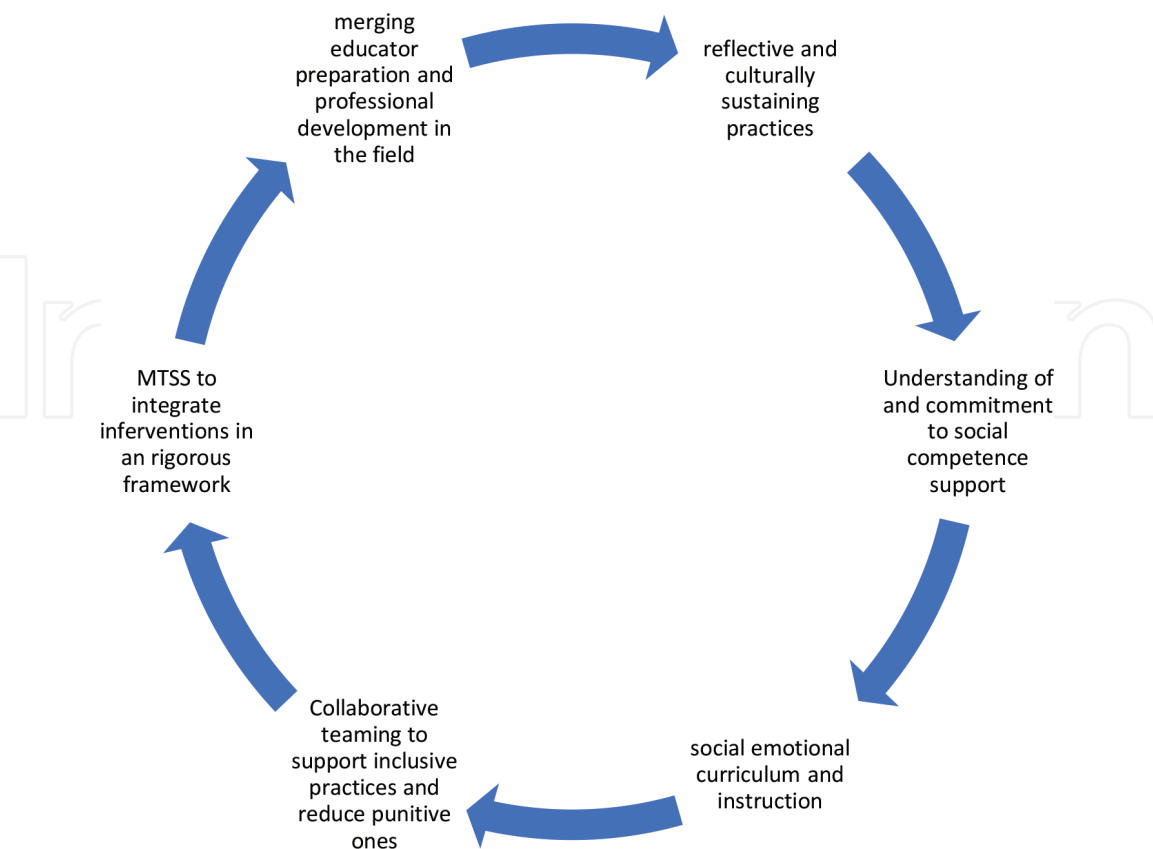

Figure 2.
Interrelated factors promoting preschool social competence.

provides an essential opportunity to learn, practice, and reflect critically upon practices as they are designed and implemented with diverse children. In this sense, the obligation of culturally sustaining teaching practice becomes the everyday work of the teacher candidate (rather than an abstract notion to be faced upon entry to the field), with support from faculty and practicing teachers.

Through supported reflective practice and experience with children and families, preschool teachers can grow to understand the complexity of social-emotional development and all of the factors influencing social competence, as well as the role of the educator and the early childhood program in teaching and intervening to influence positive outcomes. Through empowering teachers to understand and work within this complex system, successful inclusion and an inclusive philosophy are born. At this point, a critical lens on discipline and punishment of young children widens, and comprehensive-tiered systems and the interventions therein may flourish. In this sense, all key players in the preparation, support, and everyday work of preschool educators have a role in promoting social competence for each and every child.

7. Conclusions

Children who have positive relationships with peers in inclusive classrooms become accustomed to play with children of varying ability levels and may carry their inclusive experiences and perspectives as they move forward into K-12 education, which represents a meaningful, long-lasting impact on our field and the children and families served within in.

Preschool provides key opportunities to understand and influence the social competence system on which many aspects of future development are based. Teachers in inclusive classrooms can strengthen this foundation by engaging in culturally sustaining practice, directly teaching a variety of social skills in accordance with or alongside the preschool curriculum, utilizing inclusive practices and interventions to avoid or defuse punitive practices, and by engaging in collaborative and tiered systems of professional development, support, and intervention.

Without sufficient preparation, professional development, and the integration of intervention efforts in collaborative systems of teacher, child, and family support, preschool educators are not likely to meet the social competence needs of all children in inclusive classrooms. Teacher preparation must more strongly emphasize these teaching and intervention skills, so that preschool educators feel confident prompting, supporting, and further developing children's social behaviors so that inclusion programs can be successful. Teacher preparation programs can accomplish this in several ways. First, by emphasizing meaningful community partnerships, programs can better align the aims of field-based teacher preparation (see, [23]) with those of early childhood programs—in other words, by focusing teacher candidates' time in classrooms on making a positive, measurable impact on the development (including social behavior) of children. Next, through supported practice under constant faculty supervision, candidates can successfully succeed at teaching sod intervention practices that are particularly challenging to enact in practice (including addressing challenging behavior and improving social competence across people and settings). Finally, by aligning these preparation activities with professional development offered within mutually beneficial partnerships, preparation programs and early childhood education programs create a shared culture of trust and growth.

Author details

Adam S. Kennedy

Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States of America

*Address all correspondence to: akenne5@luc.edu

IntechOpen

References

[1] Whitehurst G, Lonigan C. Child development and emergent literacy. Child Development. 1998;**69**:848-872. ISSN: 00093920

[2] Odom S, McConnell S, Brown W. Social competence of young children: Conceptualization, assessment, and influences.In: Brown W, Odom S, McConnell S, editors. Social Competence of Young Children: Risk, Disability, and Intervention. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks; 2008. pp. 3-29

[3] Missall K, Hojnoski R. The critical nature of young children's emerging peer-related social competence for transition to school. In: Brown W, Odom S, McConnell S, editors. Social Competence of Young Children: Risk, Disability, and Intervention. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks; 2008. pp. P117-P137

[4] Costin S, Jones D. Friendship as a facilitator of emotional responsiveness and prosocial interventions among young children. Developmental Psychology. 1992;**28**:941-947

[5] Jones D, Greenberg M, Crowley M. Early social emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. American Journal of Public Health. 2015;**16**:e1-e8

[6] NAEYC. Standing Together against Suspension & Expulsion in Early Childhood: A Joint Position Statement. 2015. Available from: https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/topics/Standing%20Together.Joint%20Statement.FINAL__9_0.pdf [Accessed: Apr 3, 2018]

[7] Craig-Unkefer L, Kaiser A. Improving the social communication skills of at risk preschool children in a play context. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education. 2002;**22**:3-13

[8] Odom S, Zercher C, Li S, Marquart J, Sandall S, Brown W. Social acceptance and social rejection of children with disabilities in inclusive preschool settings. Journal of Educational Psychology. 2006;**98**:807-823

[9] Guralnick M, Weinhouse E. Peer-related social interactions of developmentally delayed young children: Development and characteristics. Developmental Psychology. 1984;**20**:815-827

[10] NAEYC. Position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice. 2009. Available from: https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/dap/position-statement [Accessed: Jul 15, 2018]

[11] Puzio K, Newcomer S, Pratt K, McNeely K, Jacobs M, Hooker S. Creative failures in culturally sustaining pedagogy. Language Arts. 2017;**94**:223-233

[12] Paris D. Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. Educational Researcher. 2012;**41**:93-97

[13] Richardson-Gibbs A, Klein M. Making Preschool Inclusion Work: Strategies for Supporting Children, Teachers, and Programs. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes; 2014. 259 p

[14] Artman-Meeker K, McLaren E, Hemmeter M, Grisham-Brown J. Blended practices for promoting social-emotional development in young children. In: Grisham-Brown J, Hemmeter M, editors. Blended Practices for Teaching Young Children in Inclusive Settings. Baltimore, MD: Paul H Brookes; 2017. pp. 201-246

[15] Grisham-Brown J, Hemmeter M. Setting the stage for blended practices. In: Grisham-Brown J, Hemmeter M, editors. Blended Practices for Teaching Young Children in Inclusive Settings. Baltimore, MD: Paul H Brookes. 2017. pp. 63-87

[16] Odom S, McConnell S, McEvoy M, Peterson C, Ostrosky M, Chandler L, et al. Relative effects of interventions supporting the social competence of young children with disabilities. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education. 1999;**19**:75-92

[17] Odom S, McConnell S. Play Time/ Social Time: Organizing your Classroom to Build Interaction Skills. Tucson, AZ: Communication Skill Builders; 1993

[18] Gresham F, Elliott S. Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) Rating Scales. Bloomington, MN: Pearson; 2008

[19] Greenwood C, Bradfield T, Kaminski R, Linas M, Carta J, Nylander D. The response to intervention (RTI) approach in early childhood. Focus on Exceptional Children. 2011;**43**:1-22

[20] Brown W, Odom S, Conroy M. An intervention hierarchy for promoting young children's peer interactions in natural environments. Topics in Early Childhood Special Education. 2001;**21**:162-175

[21] Fox L, Dunlap G, Hemmeter M, Joseph G, Strain P. The teaching pyramid: A model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behavior in young children. Young Children. 2003;**58**:48-52

[22] Hemmeter M, Fox L, Snyder P. A tiered model for promoting social-emotional competence and addressing challenging behavior. In: Buysse V, Peisner-Feinberg E, editors. Handbook of Response to Intervention in Early Childhood. Baltimore, MD: Brookes; 2013. pp. 85-101

[23] Kennedy A, Lees A. Merging professional preparation and development through blended practices and a tiered approach in Early Head Start. In: Pretti-Frontczak K, Grisham-Brown J, Sullivan L, editors. Young Exceptional Children Monograph 16 - Blending Practices to Strengthen Quality Early Learning Programs for ALL Children. Los Angeles, Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children; 2014