HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES
DISSERTATION DEFENSE FOR
REBECCA MADILL

TITLE: HOW DO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS SHAPE CHILDREN’S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT?
A STUDY OF TEACHERS’ USE OF SEATING ARRANGEMENTS AND RESPONSIVE TEACHING

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Areas of Specialization: Intervention and Methodology

ABSTRACT

The elementary school classroom has long been recognized as an important context for children’s social development. Because of their unique role in the classroom, teachers may be able to shape children’s peer relationships and social behavior even in the absence of direct social skills training. The present dissertation aimed to identify teaching behaviors and strategies that may be important influences on children’s social development. The dissertation consists of two related papers, each exploring a single mechanism by which teachers were expected to influence children’s social interactions and relationships. The first paper uses classroom seating charts to explore how seating arrangements are associated with changes in children’s aggressive and prosocial behaviors across several months. The second paper examines whether teachers who are highly responsive to their students promote the development of high-quality classroom relationships within a single school year. Both studies capitalize on the rich data collected as part of the Classroom Peer Ecologies Project, a study of teaching practices, peer ecologies, and child outcomes.
Results from the first paper suggest that seating arrangements may be a meaningful factor in the development of children’s social behavior. Children who were initially aggressive had more severe behavior problems when classrooms were arranged as groups rather than rows. Popularity played an important role: In classrooms arranged as groups, less-aggressive children tended to become more similar to their aggressive seatmates, but only if seatmates were popular. Children who were unpopular were especially likely to adopt the prosocial behavior of their seatmates. Results from the second paper indicate, first, that subjecting classroom observation data to a bifactor analysis reveals a common factor, which we labeled Responsive Teaching. Second, having highly responsive teachers appeared to protected children in aggressive contexts from developing low-quality relationships with their teachers and peers. Overall, this dissertation shows the value in understanding how the teacher may use both direct and indirect teaching strategies to manage the classroom. Results also underscore the importance of children’s daily interactions with teachers and classmates, rather than just children’s friends and peer group members.