

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The current research adds to the body of literature on the contextual variables that contribute to the socioemotional development of low-income children. Specifically, this study identified meaningful child and family variables from among those in the available database and examined their unique contributions toward parents' and teachers' ratings of the children's social skills and problem behaviors.

Overall, results from the current research suggest that parents and teachers generally agreed in their ratings about the children's social skills and problem behaviors. Although the parents and teachers observed the children in different environments, their ratings indicate they saw a similar pattern and/or similar aspects of the children's social skills and problem behaviors. Across the four time points, more of the predictor variables included in the current research were significantly correlated with parents' ratings of the children's social skills than they were significantly correlated with teachers' ratings of the same children. However, when the unique adjusted contributions of these predictors were examined, they accounted for only a very small percent of the variance of social skill ratings.

Results of the current research are not fully consistent with some of the previous reports on the socioemotional development of disadvantaged children. For example, some previous studies reported gender differences in cognitive/academic performance and/or socioemotional development (e.g., Beller, 1983; Cline, 1988; Gray, 1983; Gray, Ramsey, & Klaus, 1983; Hare, 1979) and some studies did not find differences between girls and boys in these domains (e.g., Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983). There is no clear reason why some studies found differences while other studies did not. The reliability of the measures used, the differences in samples across studies, and the quality or rigor with which the intervention was consistently carried out are all possible reasons for why some studies found differences and others failed to do so. Results from the current research found gender was not a significant contributor of parents' and teachers' ratings of the children's social skills or problem behaviors. In fact, at all four time points, the zero-order correlations between gender and each of the four dependent variables were non-significant. It should be noted, however, that the regression models used in the present study had a limited set of research factors available and the findings should be considered tentative.

Although different criterion variables were predicted, the present research supports a study by Woolman (1983) in which differences among children from different ethnic backgrounds were found. The Micro-Social Learning Environment study (Woolman, 1983) reported that Hispanic children showed improved elementary school readiness after they were provided 2 years of stimulating experiences. The current research found that the Hispanic variable consistently contributed significantly to parents' ratings of the children's social skills and problem behaviors whereas membership in other ethnic groups was not a significant factor. In virtually all predictor models where the dependent variable was parents' ratings of the children's social skills or problem behaviors, the unique contribution of the Hispanic variable alone was significant. Future research needs to focus on this issue to better understand why this

ethnic characteristic and associated environmental conditions appear to influence Hispanic parents and children more than others.

Measures of income, parents' education and employment status, taken as an index of SES, has been found to be a powerful predictor of children's classroom achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Herzog, Newcomb, & Cisin, 1972; Palmer, 1983). In general, relevant literature (e.g., Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989) reports that children of poorly educated mothers do worse in school and leave school earlier than do children of better educated mothers. Also, studies that have examined children of working and non-working parents have noted differences in the children's motivational level (e.g., Beller, 1983). Previous research that investigated the effects of living in a disadvantaged environment provided some evidence that the performance of children from particularly disadvantaged families may decline as the children get older, even though an intervention is applied. Results of the current research, however, do not support these findings in the context of the socioemotional development of low-income children. The current research included this index of SES in all of the multiple regression models used to determine unique contributions toward each of the measures of social skills. In these analyses, the unique contribution of SES was very small and non-significant. It does not seem likely that SES did not have much bearing or influence on parent or teacher ratings of social skills and problem behaviors. It is more likely that the highly constricted variance in SES among the families in the present sample account for these non-significant results. Future research needs to focus on the conditions under which SES contributes to the socioemotional development of low-income children.

One of the few studies that examines the socioemotional development of low-income children was conducted by Beller (1983). This research noted differences in the socioemotional development of children from single and dual parent families. Specifically, children from dual parent families were reported to have had less stereotypical attitudes about home and career options for both genders. The children also were reported to have had less traditional opinions about the parents' roles within the home. Beller also reported that first grade children from dual parent families scored higher on measures of autonomous achievement striving and scored lower on measures of dependency conflict. However, the present study failed to find any effect of variability in family configuration on parents' ratings of the children's social skills or problem behaviors.

Many of the later studies that evaluated the effect of Head Start experience found positive, immediate and/or short-term effects (i.e., kindergarten through third grade) for disadvantaged children on outcomes of gender, ethnicity, intellectual performance, SES, socioemotional development, and parental involvement. This same time span was covered in the present study which found, however, that Head Start experience was significant only at the end of kindergarten and at the end of first grade in predicting social skills, but not in predicting problem behaviors. Although statistically significant, previous Head Start experience accounted for less than 6% of the variance of parents' ratings of the children's social skills. Head Start experience failed to predict teachers' ratings of the children's social skills and problem behaviors at any point in this time span. Apparently, parents saw a little of the effects of Head Start for a

short period of time, but teachers (who were all aware of the Head Start experience of their students) saw nothing in the social development of Head Start children that differentiated them from non-Head Start children.

Findings in the literature suggested that parent involvement enabled the child to adopt the same goals as the parent, and that more involved parents were better socializers of their children and built positive relationships with the child’s teachers (Seitz, 1990). The present study did not find support for these findings. Measures of parent involvement failed to account for a significant proportion of variance of any of the measures of social development.

The variable that significantly predicted social skills was parental judgments of their neighborhood. Three separate scales were used to reflect these judgments: ratings of neighborhood cohesiveness, the presence of concerned neighbors, and the desirability of the neighborhood as a place to live. These were analyzed as separate variables because they were not well correlated with each other. In fact, although each did account for significant proportions of social skill variance, they revealed quite different patterns of the amount of variance accounted for over the time periods they were present in the data base. These proportions are presented in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1. Parental Judgments of Their Neighborhood Percent Variance of Social Skills Accounted For		
Scale	Time Period	
	End of Kindergarten	End of First Grade
Cohesive Neighborhood	3%	3%
Concerned Neighbors	12%	5%
Desirable Neighborhood	6%	17%

Results of the present study lend support to previous studies that suggest educating parents in ways that encourage and positively reinforce desirable behaviors may be beneficial in developing social skills. Three parenting styles scales were available for this issue. These were encouraging/respectful, domineering, and disinterested parenting styles. At the end of kindergarten, the combined contribution of the three parenting styles entered as a block was almost 29% of social skill variance, with the encouraging/respectful scale uniquely accounting for slightly more than 16% alone. At the end of first grade, the variance accounted for by this block decreased by half, yet the encouraging/respectful parenting scale still uniquely contributed about 10%. In contrast, the unique contributions of the two negative parenting styles were not significant.

The contrasting contributions of the positive (i.e., encouraging/respectful) and negative (i.e., domineering and disinterested) parenting styles allow for an interesting insight. It is possible that the disadvantaged children experienced negativism from many of the people with whom they interacted (e.g., neighbors, siblings, teachers, peers). It is clear that positive, supporting parents represent a significant source of socialization in these children, whereas

negative and controlling parents are, at the least, non-contributors to the social growth of their children.

The present study emphasizes two important points. First, the findings of virtually all studies conducted on the socioemotional development of low-income children are fragile. The findings from the present study, not unlike those from other studies, are fragile in the sense that they are dependent upon, and variable across, the different measures used and the various models tested. It is very likely that different results would have been found if different measures had been used or if the models had included different predictors. Second, the literature in this area is fragile. That is, throughout the literature on the socioemotional growth of disadvantaged children, there is a glaring lack of replication in the measuring instruments, sample, and analytic techniques used. Future research in this area needs to focus on controlled replication if confidence in the findings associated with the socioemotional development of low-income children is to be increased.

Future research needs to focus on employing alternative methods when examining the effect that demographic and other contextual variables have on the socioemotional development of low-income children. This developmental process is becoming so complex that gathering data from surveys and analyzing the responses solely by quantitative methods fall short in their capacity to explain the interactions of the many factors that impact the child's socioemotional growth. More qualitative, inductive methods are required to adequately and sufficiently capture the complex nature and associated processes related to the child's socioemotional development. Only when the interrelationships among the different child, family, school, and neighborhood characteristics are more fully investigated will it be possible to understand their effects on the socioemotional development of low-income children and, in turn, to design interventions with the potential for long-term, positive benefits.