

HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL:

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC COMPOSITION
OF PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS AND
CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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I. PURPOSE, DATA AND METHOD

PURPOSE

- ✗ Many states have been expanding access to Pre-K and trying to identify and support the components of high-quality preschool settings.
- ✗ These policies have reduced the historical separation of low and higher-SES children in preschool settings.
- ✗ My question: Is the socio-economic composition of the classroom an aspect of preschool quality?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is the socio-economic composition of children's preschool classrooms related to how much they learn, regardless of children's own SES and other demographic characteristics?
2. To what extent do aspects of preschool quality, explain any relationship between socio-economic composition and children's learning?
3. Does the strength of the relationship depend on the classroom context, such as when teacher quality is high or class size is low?

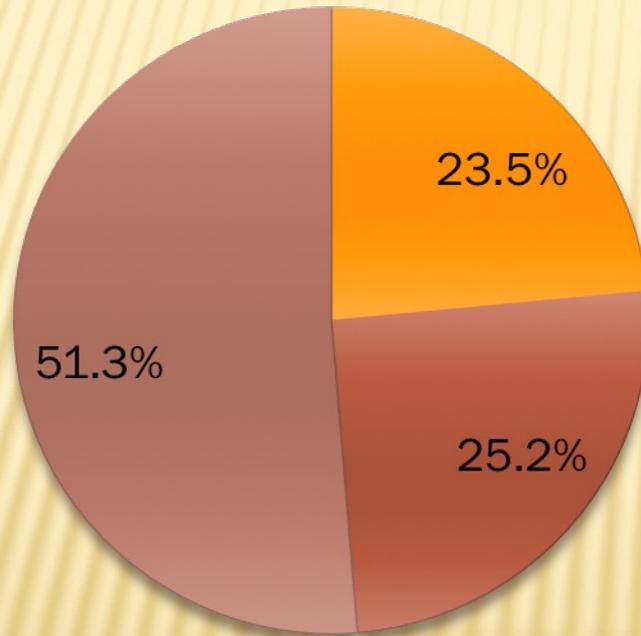
DATA AND METHOD

- ✘ 11 state Pre-K programs
- ✘ 2,966 children in 704 classrooms
- ✘ Outcomes: Receptive language, expressive language, math, and social skills
- ✘ Five months between the two assessments
- ✘ Half (54.1%) in half-day programs
- ✘ Multi-level modeling (HLM)

II. KEY FINDINGS

CHILDREN'S CLASSROOMS

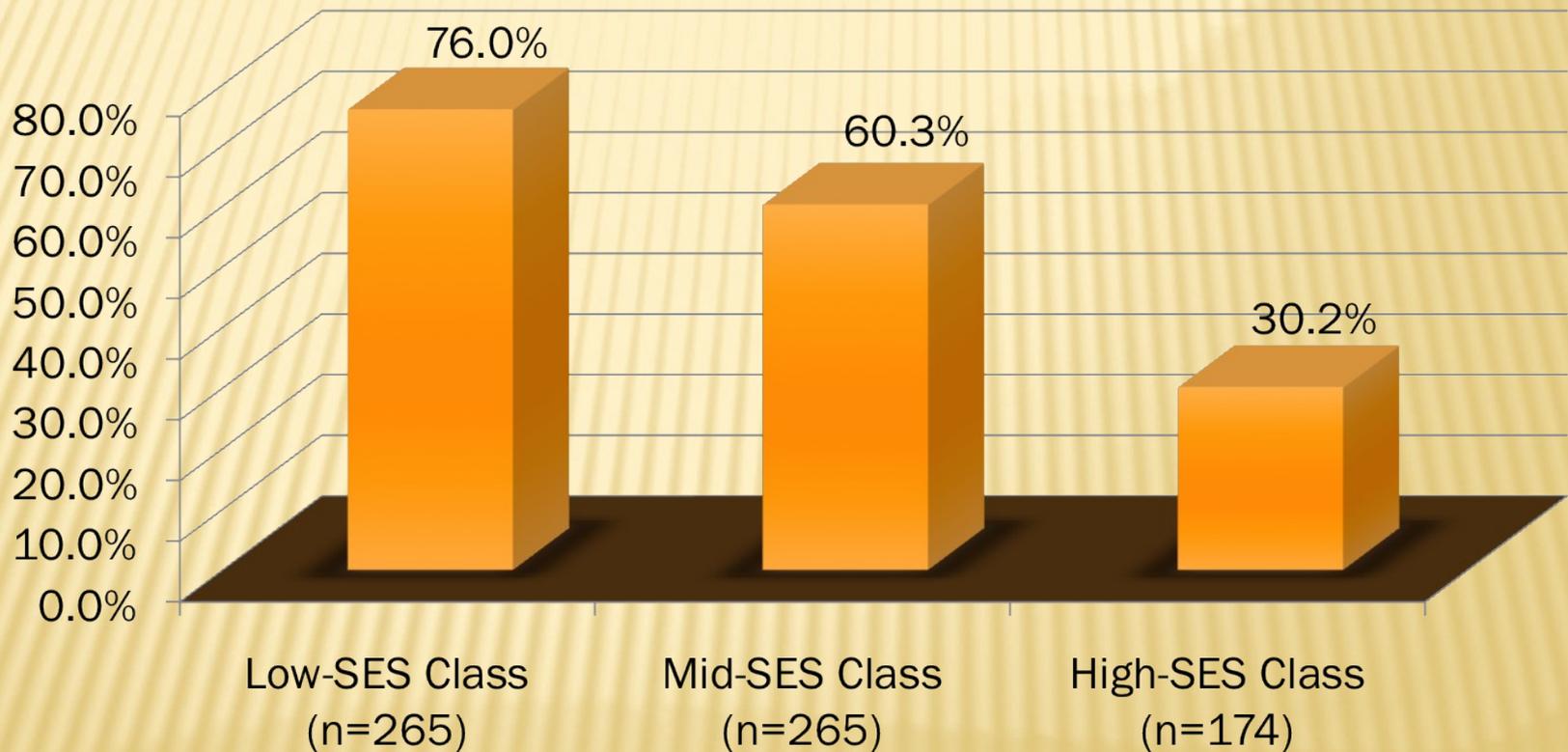
Distribution of Children in Low, Medium, and High Poverty Classrooms (n=2,966)



- Low Poverty Class (Less than 1/3 in poverty)
- Medium Poverty Class (1/3 to 2/3 in poverty)
- High Poverty Class (More than 2/3 in poverty)

RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION

Percent Minority (within classrooms)



QUALITY IN LOW-SES CLASSROOMS

- ✗ In low-SES classrooms, more likely to find:
 - ✗ teachers who lack a BA
 - ✗ teachers low on emotional support
 - ✗ low ratings on the ECERS
- ✗ Differences in teachers' instructional quality among low, middle, and high-SES classrooms were not statistically significant.

RQ1: IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC COMPOSITION AND PRESCHOOL LEARNING?

- ✘ Class mean SES was a significant and positive predictor of children's receptive language, expressive language, and math learning, regardless of children's own SES, other demographic characteristics, and the racial/ethnic composition of their class.

RQ1: IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC COMPOSITION AND PRESCHOOL LEARNING?

- ✘ Class mean SES was not significantly related to social skills learning, controlling for children's own SES, other demographic characteristics, and the racial/ethnic composition of their class.

RQ2: WHAT EXPLAINS THESE RELATIONSHIPS?

- ✘ The relationships between class SES and receptive language, expressive language, and math learning were not explained by structural or instructional aspects of preschool quality.
- ✘ Instructional quality was a positive predictor of children's learning across all three outcomes, but did not alter the coefficients for class SES.

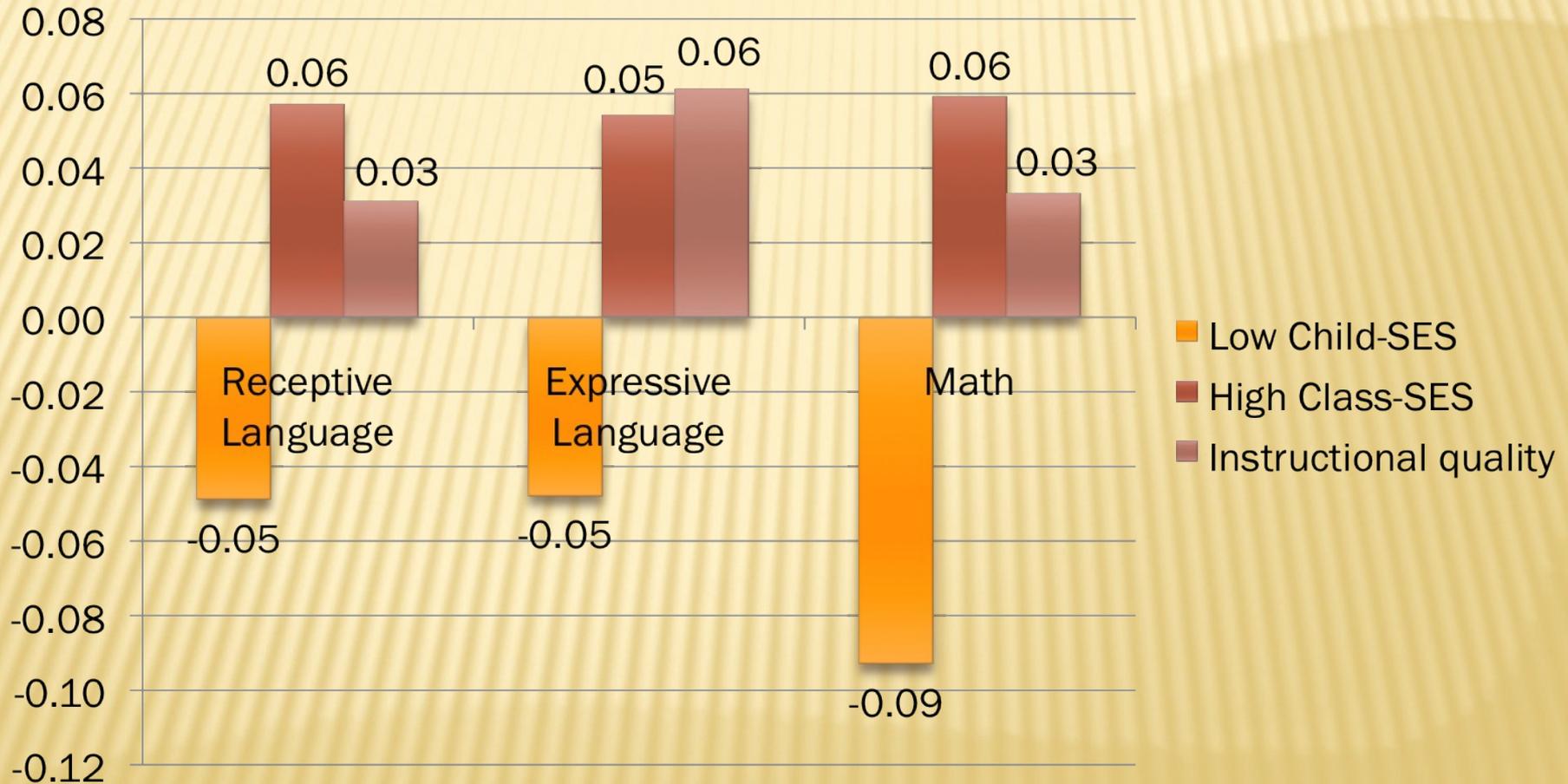
RQ3: DOES CONTEXT MATTER?

- ✘ Income diversity further increased the boost in receptive language learning associated with higher-SES classrooms.
- ✘ High-quality teachers further increased the boost in expressive language learning associated with higher-SES classrooms.
- ✘ The combination of income diversity and highly educated teachers further increased math learning in preschool classrooms.

RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION

- ✗ For receptive language gains, both socio-economic and racial/ethnic composition were significant and independent predictors of children's learning.

HOW MUCH CHILDREN LEARN: COMPARING EFFECT SIZES (SD UNITS)



III. POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

SUBSTANTIVE SIGNIFICANCE

- ✘ The “dose” of Pre-K is small, which may explain small effect sizes.
- ✘ The coefficients for class SES are comparable in size to the estimates for instructional quality and even children’s own SES.
- ✘ This means that wider access to higher-SES classrooms could keep the skills gap between lower and higher-SES children from widening during Pre-K.

PEER EFFECTS?

- ✘ Structural or instructional aspects of quality did not explain the effect of class mean SES.
- ✘ Other candidates: Unmeasured variables, selection bias, or peer effects
- ✘ Several studies have found that the skills of peers predict children's preschool learning.
- ✘ Peer effects may be most powerful in preschool when learning is very social. If so, high-poverty settings cannot capture this aspect of preschool quality.

THE POWER OF GOOD TEACHING

- ✘ The findings indicate that both high-quality instruction and income diversity enhance language learning in higher-SES classrooms.
- ✘ This suggests that individualized instruction, cultural competency, and support for peer interactions could be important aspects of teacher quality in diverse preschool classrooms.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- ✘ Could not compare different groups of children.
- ✘ Used narrowly-defined, short-term outcomes.

THINKING ABOUT PRESCHOOL QUALITY

- ✘ Socio-economic composition has been overlooked as a potentially important aspect of preschool quality.
- ✘ The findings suggest that policymakers who are fostering the creation of socio-economically diverse classrooms are getting a boost in children's preschool learning.

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

- ✘ Give all parents high-quality choices beyond their neighborhoods.
- ✘ Make the choices practically feasible:
 - + Transportation, information, cultural outreach, full-day options, and adequate funding.