The Role of the Executive Functions in STEM Learning
Importance of Preschool Numeracy
Alternative interpretations

- Early developing numeracy skills have a causal role in success at mastering STEM material.

- Maybe—but alternatives?
Alternatives

• Smart is smart.
• Parents who teach children to count, play number games with them, also support later educational success.
• HOW RULED OUT (not whole story)
• LESSON 1. MUST MAKE LITERACY AN EQUAL FOCUS WITH PRELITERACY IN PRESCHOOL
EF, Frontal Lobe Function
Mischel’s Marshmallow Studies

Walter Mischel Marshmallow experiment

Average wait between 7 and 8 minutes, range 0 to 15 minutes
EF is Important to Educational Outcomes

• How long children waited at age 4 predicts:
• SAT scores at age 18, income at age 30, likelihood of ever having been arrested at age 40.
• Measures of EF at age 4 the best predictors of school readiness at age 5.
• Measures of EF at every age the best predictors of school success at that age.
Executive Function Development

- Domain general capacities that underlie the human capacity for flexibly deploying their cognitive resources in thought and action.
- Inhibition (self control)
- Cognitive Conflict Resolution (cognitive control)
- Working Memory
- Set Shifting
• Inhibition—resisting the temptation to eat the slice of cake now to serve the goal of staying thin.
• Also, prepotent response inhibition (e.g., Stroop task)
STROOP

RED GREEN BLUE YELLOW RED GREEN BLUE YELLOW GREEN RED GREEN YELLOW YELLOW BLUE RED YELLOW BLUE GREEN YELLOW RED GREEN
STROOP

RED  GREEN  BLUE  YELLOW  RED
GREEN  BLUE  YELLOW  GREEN  RED
GREEN  YELLOW  BLUE  RED  YELLOW
BLUE  GREEN  YELLOW  RED  GREEN
Working Memory

- E.g., backward digit span. (Hold items in working memory and also manipulate them).
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Set shifting

• Heirarchical rules—e.g., if capital letters, name the font color; if lower case, read the word.

• Practice:
  RED
  yellow
STROOP

RED  blue  yellow  RED  GREEN
blue  yellow  GREEN  RED  green
YELLOW  blue  red  YELLOW
BLUE  green  yellow  red  GREEN
Frontal Lobe (neocortex)

- The seat of EF. (Lesions to the frontal lobe impair EF; imaging studies show frontal lobe to be active in tasks that are heavy in EF demands).
- Frontal lobes latest to mature in childhood; maturation continues through adolescence.
- More highly developed in humans than other primates.
Stable

- Measures of different aspects of EF correlate with each other at a given point in development.
- Measure of EF at time 1 correlate with measures at time 2, even years apart.
EF development

- Continues throughout childhood
- Stable individual differences in EF capacity
- Individual differences in EF very important to many different outcomes in life!
- Including STEM learning
Importance for STEM Learning

• Concurrent measures predict:
  Teacher ratings of school readiness
  Performance on standardized tests of STEM
  learning at every age—preschool thru 12th grade
Prospective Studies

- E.g., measure EF, numeracy skills at beginning of Pre-K year.
- What predicts mastery of arithmetic skills at the end of K, controlling for IQ, parental education, SES?

Pre-K numeracy measures

Also, pre-K EF measures, even after controlling for numeracy, IQ, SES.
Why Might EF play a role in STEM Learning?
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- High EF, supports, staying on task, controlling attention, better social relations (with teachers, with peers)
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- All of the above. But deeper cognitive reason as well—needed for conceptual change.
Theory 1

• Animal/people: Fundamentally intentional/causal agents
• “Alive” = active/real/existing
• “Dead” = opposite of life. Not active/real/existing
• Body supports intentional action. Internal organs—one organ—one function.
Vitalist Biology

People/Animals. Living things (which now includes plants as well).

Alive = reproduces, grows, eats…

Dead = end of life cycle

Bodily function = system supporting biological goals (growth, health).
The Study.

- EF battery
- Vitalist Battery
  -- animism interview
  -- death interview
  -- bodily function interview
Results