

Tempering Temperament: A Critical Evaluation of *INSIGHTS* into Children's Temperaments

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Jessica Hunter's Education 322 course *The Social Lives of School Children*. The assignment asked students to write a paper summarizing and critically appraising a Social-Emotional Education (SEE) program of their choice. The paper uses APA citation style.

Within education the adage every child is unique is more than just a turn of phrase; it has important implications for the social, emotional and academic development of students. *INSIGHTS into Children's Temperaments* is an American social-emotional education program that takes this issue and centers it. Based upon the premise that each child is born with a unique temperament, *INSIGHTS* aims to help children and those around them recognize their inherent strengths and weaknesses (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). This program is intended to support a child's social-emotional development not through changing their temperament but through increasing self-awareness, empathy and changing the responses of others to the child (CASEL, 2020). This paper examines the efficacy of *INSIGHTS into Children's Temperaments* in light of current theory and research. Within low-income urban schools in the United States, *INSIGHTS* has been found to be effective at supporting early academic development through reducing disruptive behaviours and increasing sustained attention (O'Connor et al., 2014; McClowry et al., 2010). However, these positive effects are mediated, first, by a conflict of interest wherein all research on the efficacy of *INSIGHTS* included a stakeholder of the program, and, second, by limited generalizability wherein all research focused only on one demographic.

At its core, *INSIGHTS* is a comprehensive early intervention program that aims to educate teachers, parents and students on the nature of different temperaments in order to support positive social, emotional and academic development (CASEL, 2020). Founded in 2011 by American temperament expert Sandee McClowry, *INSIGHTS* targets students in kindergarten to grade two along with their parents and teachers (INSIGHTS Intervention, 2019). The program is cognitive-behavioural in nature with a curriculum that is set, specific and delivered apart

from regular classroom content by a trained facilitator (CASEL, 2020; LeMare, 2011). Detailed information about facilitator training and program materials, including prices, is available on the program website (INSIGHTS Intervention, 2019). Implementation of the *INSIGHTS* program includes a separate set of lessons for parents, teachers and students; each set of lessons has its own unique objectives but all are tied together by a focus on four different temperament styles: cautious, social, high maintenance and industrious (INSIGHTS Intervention, 2019). The children's program consists of ten 30-minute lessons which are designed to be delivered once per week (INSIGHTS Intervention, 2019). These lessons use four puppets, each representing a different temperament style, to help students solve daily problems, develop empathy and accept themselves and their classmates (CASEL, 2020). After being introduced to the puppets and their temperaments, the students learn why certain puppets find certain situations easy while others find them difficult (CASEL, 2020). Students then use the puppets to explore their own feelings and responses and to practice techniques for managing everyday dilemmas (CASEL, 2020). The parent and teacher programs, which each include up to ten weekly sessions, compliment the children's program by creating awareness of the way in which temperament influences children's behaviour across settings (CASEL, 2020). With an understanding of temperament styles adults can tailor their demands and responses to better support the individual child (CASEL, 2020). Together, the lessons for students, parents and teachers all aim to foster positive social, emotional and academic development by increasing awareness of temperament-based differences, teaching effective management strategies and, thus, promoting a good fit between the child and their environment (CASEL, 2020).

INSIGHTS' programming has a strong theoretical foundation that is based in temperament theory (McClowry et al., 2010). Temperaments are intrinsic, biologically-based variations in behavioural style, especially variations as they relate to reactivity and regulation (Sanson et al., 2004). While temperament is viewed as relatively stable across time, current research and theorizing in the field pays special attention to the concept of goodness of fit, the alignment between a child's temperament and the requirements of their environment, which is understood to be malleable and thus can be targeted by programs such as *INSIGHTS* (McClowry et al., 2010; Sanson et al., 2004). *INSIGHTS* curriculum relies on four temperament categories that are broad and inclusive enough to be applicable to a wide range of children (INSIGHTS Intervention, 2019). Of these categories, two are considered at-risk for poor fit and poor developmental outcomes: those with cautious or shy temperaments and those with high-maintenance or difficult temperaments (McCormick et al., 2015b; McCormick et al., 2018). A child's temperament style can influence their developmental outcomes in multiple ways including indirectly, wherein the effects of a child's temperament are moderated by an environmental factor, and transactionally, wherein interactions between the child and

their environment over time lead to certain developmental outcomes (Sanson et al., 2004). For example, incidences of internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems, often associated respectively with shy and high-maintenance temperaments, can be moderated and mediated by external factors such as parenting and instructional styles (Sanson et al., 2004). As this demonstrates, context, fit and temperament are all important considerations when it comes to influencing and intervening in a child's social developmental outcomes. Based on this premise, *INSIGHTS* seeks to reduce negative outcomes, such as poor academic achievement and poor social competence, by providing both children and caregivers with a framework for working with rather than against a child's unique temperament (McClowry et al., 2010). By reframing negative perceptions of temperament styles as well as teaching temperament-based management strategies, *INSIGHTS* aims to foster appreciation for individual differences and to better the fit between a child and their environment (McCormick et al., 2015b). In line with current knowledge in temperament theory which purports that a good fit can increase achievement and adaptive behaviour, this increase in alignment is how and why *INSIGHTS* claims to be an effective social-emotional education program (McClowry et al., 2010; Sanson et al., 2004).

Indeed, results from two randomized controlled trials within America have found *INSIGHTS* to be effective at supporting the self-regulatory abilities and math and reading skills of at-risk students in kindergarten and grade one (O'Connor et al., 2014; McClowry et al., 2010). Both of these studies were conducted in low-income urban schools and used a supplementary reading group as the control condition (O'Connor et al., 2014; McClowry et al., 2010). O'Connor et al. (2014) found that compared to the control condition, children exposed to *INSIGHTS* demonstrated faster improvement in math and reading achievement and that these positive results were partially mediated by improved attentional skills and decreased disruptive behaviour over time. McClowry et al. (2010) also found that *INSIGHTS* was effective at reducing incidences of aggression and increasing sustained attention but only among boys. Considering that, in comparison to girls, the boys in this study displayed more behavioural issues at baseline, *INSIGHTS* may be most effective amongst children who are already experiencing behaviour regulation issues (McClowry et al., 2010). Data from the larger of the two studies, O'Connor et al. (2014), has been analyzed in a multitude of ways in subsequent studies (eg: McCormick et al., 2015a; McCormick et al., 2015b; McCormick et al., 2018) which provide further insight into *INSIGHTS*' effectiveness among certain subgroups. While none of these studies investigate gender differences further, their results do, in other ways, support the notion that *INSIGHTS* has greater efficacy among at-risk populations. For example, looking specifically at children with high-maintenance temperaments, McCormick et al. (2015b) found that those enrolled in *INSIGHTS* experienced greater reduction in disruptive and distracted behaviours than those in the control group. *INSIGHTS*' benefits appear to apply

to shy children, too, as greater increases in math achievement were found in classrooms with a high percentage of shy children (McCormick et al., 2018). Beyond individual characteristics, research shows that family factors matter as well; McCormick et al. (2015a) found that *INSIGHTS* had a larger effect on children whose parents took part in the program at lower rates. In comparison to peers with high rates of parental participation, these children showed more improvement on math, reading, behaviour and attention measurements, possibly because, due to family level factors such as poverty, these children were at a higher risk for negative outcomes at baseline (McCormick et al., 2015a). Taken together, the empirical research reviewed here suggests that *INSIGHTS* is most effective and advantageous for students at a higher level of risk, including risk from pre-existing behaviour problems, socioeconomic challenges, low parental engagement and certain temperament styles.

INSIGHTS has both a strong theoretical foundation and evidence of efficacy among at-risk populations, however the overall strength of the program is mediated by two weaknesses: stakeholder involvement in research and uncertainty regarding generalizability. First, while the research reviewed above found generally positive results, these results must be interpreted alongside the knowledge that *INSIGHTS* developer Sandee McClowry was a part of the research team for all studies. Since *INSIGHTS* is a private program and thus a for-profit business, this represents a conflict of interest (INSIGHTS Intervention, 2019). As a stakeholder of the program, McClowry has a vested interest in proving *INSIGHTS*' efficacy and presenting it in a positive light. Therefore, her involvement on all empirical investigations of *INSIGHTS* raises important questions; one might ask if we are seeing an objective and well-rounded perspective, or if it is possible that only findings beneficial to the company were chosen for publication. Since these questions are unanswerable with the small scope of research currently available, additional third party research must be conducted to increase confidence in the effectiveness of *INSIGHTS*. Secondly, future research should seek to assess and understand the program's effects across diverse populations to mitigate concerns about the generalizability of past findings. As noted, the research reviewed in this paper was conducted amongst a single demographic, low-income urban school children in America, and this limits the conclusions that can be drawn (O'Connor et al., 2014). Given the available research, it is currently unknown whether *INSIGHTS* would generate the same positive effects in schools in rural or affluent areas or in countries such as Canada whose education systems rank high on measures of equity (LeMare, 2011). The strength of *INSIGHTS* will be improved if the demographics most likely to benefit are empirically identified alongside the aspects of the program responsible for these benefits. Considering empirical research thus far suggests that *INSIGHTS* has a greater effect amongst at risk populations (eg: McClowry et al., 2010; McCormick et al., 2015a), and considering current theory

asserts that only certain temperament styles are risk factors for behaviour problems, *INSIGHTS* may have greater strength as a targeted program rather than a universal one (Sanson et al., 2004). Overall, despite weak points in research due to conflict of interest and generalizability concerns, *INSIGHTS*' theory and programming reflect current knowledge in the field of temperament theory and, thus, warrant further investigation.

As this paper has shown, *INSIGHTS into Children's Temperaments* has a strong theoretical foundation and support from small scope of empirical research; however, the questions of generalizability and conflicting interests that have been raised within this paper indicate that more knowledge is needed before *INSIGHTS* can confidently be recommended for implementation in Canadian schools. Current research suggests that *INSIGHTS* has the potential to intervene in and avert the negative academic and behavioural outcomes associated with certain temperament styles and other common risk factors but, as promising as these findings are, the program remains under-researched. Given theories regarding the transactional nature of temperament-environment interactions over time, a temperament-based intervention like *INSIGHTS* which aims to increase self-awareness, acceptance and goodness of fit may well contribute to far reaching, long-term positive outcomes across demographics, but, at this time, this remains to be shown empirically (Sanson et al., 2004). Knowing more about how *INSIGHTS* works and who it works on will strengthen the program and inform if and how it can be a beneficial social-emotional education program for at-risk Canadian students.

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