

1 **GATA2 deficiency during embryogenesis elevates Interferon Regulatory Factor-8**
2 **to subvert a progenitor cell differentiation program**

3

4

5 Kirby D. Johnson and Emery H. Bresnick*

6

7

8 Wisconsin Blood Cancer Research Institute, Department of Cell and Regenerative

9 Biology, Carbone Cancer Center, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and

10 Public Health, 1111 Highland Avenue, 4009 WIMR, Madison, Wisconsin

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19 **For correspondence:** ehbresni@wisc.edu

Abstract

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22

Cell type-specific transcription factors control stem and progenitor cell transitions by establishing networks containing hundreds of genes and proteins. Network complexity renders it challenging to discover essential versus modulatory or redundant components. This scenario is exemplified by GATA2 regulation of hematopoiesis during embryogenesis. Previously, we demonstrated that loss of *Gata2* -77 enhancer disrupts the GATA2-dependent genetic network governing erythro-myeloid differentiation. The aberrant network includes the transcription factor Interferon Regulatory Factor-8 and a host of innate immune regulators. Mutant progenitors lose the capacity to balance production of diverse myelo-erythroid progeny. To elucidate mechanisms, we asked if IRF8 is essential, contributory or not required. *Irf8* ablation, in the context of the -77 mutant allele, reversed granulocytic deficiencies of -77^{-/-} embryos and rescued an imbalance of dendritic cell progenitors. Despite many dysregulated components that control vital processes, including transcription and signaling, aberrant elevation of a single transcription factor deconstructed the differentiation program.

Introduction

1
2
3 The cloning of sequence-specific DNA binding proteins unveiled “master
4 regulators” including GATA1, which promotes erythrocyte, megakaryocyte, mast cell and
5 basophil development, and GATA2, which mediates hematopoietic stem and progenitor
6 cell (HSPC) genesis/function (1). During mouse embryogenesis, GATA2 ablation disrupts
7 multi-lineage hematopoiesis, yielding lethality (2). Human *GATA2* heterozygous
8 mutations cause GATA2 deficiency syndromes involving cytopenias, immunodeficiency,
9 bone marrow failure, leukemia and lymphedema (3). These mutations alter the *GATA2*
10 coding region or “+9.5” intronic enhancer (4). Another pathogenic enhancer resides
11 upstream of *GATA2* (77 kb in mice; 110 kb in humans) (5). A 3q21;q26 inversion removes
12 this enhancer from one allele, positioning it near *MECOM1*, inducing *EVI1* expression
13 and AML (6,7). Homozygous deletion of the -77 enhancer depletes megakaryocyte-
14 erythroid progenitors (MEPs), yielding embryonic lethality (5,8). -77^{-/-} myelo-erythroid
15 progenitors lose multi-lineage differentiation and generate predominantly macrophages
16 *ex vivo* (5). Monocytopenia characterizes GATA2 deficiency syndrome, but bone marrow
17 macrophages persist (9).

18 Although GATA2-regulated genes have been described (1), downstream
19 mediators and epistatic relationships that control HSPCs are unresolved. Discovering
20 mediators has been challenging due to context-dependent GATA2 mechanisms (1).
21 Proteomics and single-cell transcriptomics with -77^{-/-} progenitors revealed losses of
22 proteins mediating erythroid, megakaryocyte, basophil and granulocyte differentiation
23 and elevated innate immune proteins, including Interferon Responsive Factor 8 (IRF8)
24 (10).

1 IRF8 interacts with other IRFs, PU.1, AP-1 and BatF3 at composite binding sites
2 to control immune cell development (11). IRF8 levels dictate target gene selection by
3 regulating transcription factor complex composition (11). As IRF8 promotes monocyte
4 development, and its loss favors neutrophil generation (12,13), it is attractive to propose
5 that IRF8 upregulation in *-77^{-/-}* progenitors unrestrains monocytic differentiation, and
6 GATA2 downregulation of IRF8 is critical for multi-lineage differentiation. Since
7 expression correlations often do not reflect causation, and IRF8 function in GATA2
8 networks is not understood, IRF8 might function non-redundantly or redundantly. We
9 asked if *Irf8* ablation, in the context of the *-77^{-/-}* allele, rescues the diverse myelo-erythroid
10 differentiation potential of progenitors.

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

1

Results and Discussion

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

The murine granulocyte-monocyte progenitor (GMP) population (Lin⁻cKit⁺Sca-1⁻CD34⁺Fc γ R(CD16/CD32)^{hi}) contains bipotential hematopoietic progenitors and committed granulocyte (GP) and monocyte (MP/cMoP) progenitors (14). In comparison to wild type fetal liver, the GP:MP ratio within the GMP population of -77^{-/-} fetal liver favors MPs (10), and -77^{-/-} progenitors generate predominantly macrophages *ex vivo* (10). IRF8 regulates survival and differentiation, but not production, of lineage-committed bone marrow progenitors (14). IRF8 deficiency increases granulocytes, whereas IRF8 promotes monocyte generation (14).

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

To determine if high IRF8 resulting from -77 enhancer loss causes the GP:MP imbalance or contributed to deficiencies in other progenitor populations, fetal liver progenitors were quantified in -77 and *Irf8* double-mutant (-77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{-/-}) embryos (Figure 1A). In red cell-depleted E14.5 fetal liver, *Irf8* expression was undetectable in -77^{+/+};*Irf8*^{-/-} and -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{-/-} embryos and elevated in -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{+/+} versus -77^{+/+};*Irf8*^{+/+} littermates (Figure 1B). As *Gata2* expression was indistinguishable in -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{+/+} and -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{-/-} livers, changes in progenitor populations in double mutants were not caused by increased *Gata2* expression. IRF8 loss did not rescue the -77^{-/-} megakaryocyte-erythroid progenitor (MEP) deficiency (7) (Figure 2A, B). GPs (CD115^{low}) and MPs (CD115^{hi}) are abundant within the wild type fetal liver GMP population (10), and -77 enhancer deletion shifted the balance to favor MPs (Figure 2A, C). IRF8 loss greatly reduced the percentage of MPs and elevated GPs within the Ly6C⁻ GMP pool. As a percentage of the Lin⁻ population, -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{-/-} MPs were reduced by 29% compared to -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{+/+} littermates. GPs increased 9.3 fold to comprise 20% of the Lin⁻ pool (Fig 2D). As GPs dominated in -77^{-/-};*Irf8*^{-/-} mutants,

1 reducing IRF8 reversed the imbalance in myeloid progenitors that favored MPs in $77^{-/-}$
2 embryos.

3 Dendritic cell (DC) defects characterize GATA2 deficiency syndrome (3). As with
4 monocytes, IRF8 controls DC generation (14). IRF8 levels within DC-restricted
5 progenitors (CDPs) determine the DC subtype produced; high and low IRF8 promotes
6 cDC1 and cDC2 production, respectively (11). *Irf8*^{-/-} mice exhibit increased bone marrow
7 monocyte-dendritic cell progenitors (MDPs) and reduced CDPs (14).

8 In addition to elevated levels of innate immune and monocyte genes (10),
9 transcriptomic analysis of $-77^{-/-}$ fetal liver progenitors revealed increased expression of
10 multiple genes important for DC differentiation and/or selectively enriched in DC
11 progenitor or precursor cells (Figure 3A) (15). Since IRF8 promotes DC development in
12 adult mice and humans (14,16), GATA2 suppresses IRF8 expression in mouse embryos
13 and high IRF8 corrupts GATA2-deficient ($-77^{-/-}$) progenitor differentiation, we asked if the
14 GATA2-IRF8 axis impacts DC progenitors. MDPs (cKit^{hi}) produce CDPs, which express
15 intermediate levels of cKit (17). In *Irf8*^{-/-} E14.5 fetal liver, CDPs and MDPs comprised
16 9.3% and 91%, respectively, of the FcγR^{low}CD34⁺FIt3⁺CD115⁺Ly6C⁻ progenitors (Figure
17 3B, C). In wild type littermates, CDPs were 21% of the total, contrasting with 55% in $-77^{-/-}$
18 fetal liver ($p = 5.8 \times 10^{-7}$). Bi-allelic *Irf8* and -77 loss restored the CDP:MDP ratio to resemble
19 wild type embryos. However, as with MPs, the proportion of MDPs and CDPs in the $77^{-/-}$
20 Lin⁻ pool increased; 4.8 fold ($P = 1.5 \times 10^{-5}$) and 21 fold ($P = 1.2 \times 10^{-6}$), respectively, compared
21 to $77^{+/+}$ (Figure 3D). In -77 ; *Irf8* double mutants, MDPs were reduced by 44% ($P = 0.03$),
22 while the percentage of CDPs decreased 7.5 fold ($P = 0.0002$), consistent with the role of
23 IRF8 in CDP production (12). Opposing GATA2 and IRF8 activities controlled the

1 CDP:MDP ratio, extending GATA2-IRF8 axis function beyond establishing a balance
2 between MPs and GPs.

3 Our results provide evidence for a GATA2-IRF8 axis that dictates myelo-erythroid
4 progenitor generation and function during mouse embryogenesis. Since *Gata2* and *Irf8*
5 mRNAs co-reside in single progenitors at reciprocal levels, and re-introducing GATA2
6 into $-77^{-/-}$ progenitors decreases IRF8 (10), the levels of GATA2 and IRF8 in a single cell
7 are key determinants of this developmental mechanism. During basophil development,
8 IRF8 loss blocks Lin⁻Sca-1⁻cKit⁺CD150⁻β7integrin⁻CD27⁺ GP differentiation, and GATA2
9 expression in *Irf8*^{-/-} bone marrow cells rescues basophil differentiation (18). Whether
10 GATA2 and IRF8 function in the same or distinct networks and cells to control
11 differentiation in this context was not described.

12 The reduced GATA2 of $-77^{-/-}$ myelo-erythroid progenitors, which impedes
13 erythroid, megakaryocyte, granulocyte and basophil developmental trajectories, while
14 maintaining monocyte progenitors, is associated with collapse of the GATA2 network
15 (3,161 differentially expressed genes and 434 differentially expressed proteins in $-77^{-/-}$
16 versus $-77^{+/+}$ progenitors) (10). As the aberrant network includes many regulatory factors,
17 one would assume that a multi-component mechanism skews differentiation. Our results
18 with the double-knockout rescue paradigm demonstrated that ablating *Irf8* rectified the
19 GP deficiency in $-77^{-/-}$ progenitors (Figure 4), thus establishing a mechanism in which
20 GATA2 suppresses IRF8 levels to control myelo-erythroid progenitor fate, and IRF8
21 elevation in GATA2-deficient embryos corrupts this mechanism. Applying the strategy
22 innovated to other network components will discriminate vital stem and progenitor cell

1 regulators from those exhibiting intriguing expression patterns that represent
2 inconsequential correlations.

3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43

Materials and Methods

Mice. *Gata2*^{-77^{-/-}} mice (10) and *Irf8*^{-/-} strain B6(Cg)-*Irf8*^{tm1.2Hm/J} (Jackson Labs, Bar Harbor, Maine) were bred to generate *-77^{+/-};Irf8^{+/-}* males and females for timed matings. Animal protocols were approved by the UW–Madison Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee in accordance with the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC International) regulations.

Flow cytometry. E14.5 fetal liver MEPs, MPs, GPs, MDPs and CDPs were quantified using the LSR Fortessa flow cytometer (BD Biosciences) or sorted using a FACSAria (BD Biosciences). Antibodies were from Biolegend unless indicated. B220, TER-119, CD5, CD11b, IgM, Ly6G and Sca1 antibodies were FITC-conjugated. Other antibodies were Blue Violet (BV) 605-conjugated CD16/CD32 (BD Biosciences), BV711-conjugated Ly-6C, phycoerythrin (PE)-conjugated CD115, eFluor 660–conjugated CD34 (Thermo Fisher Scientific), peridinin chlorophyll (PerCP)-eFluor710–conjugated CD135 (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and PE-Cy7–conjugated cKit. Stained cells were washed with PBS, 2% FBS, 10 mM glucose, and 2.5 mM EDTA, resuspended in the same buffer containing DAPI and passed through 25 μm strainers. DAPI (4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole) was used for live-dead discrimination.

Acknowledgments

NIH grant R01DK68634, Carbone Cancer Center P30CA014520 and Edward Evans Foundation grants supported this work. We thank Mabel M. Jung for graphic design.

Competing Interests: The authors have nothing to declare.

References

- 1
2 1. Katsumura, K. R., Bresnick, E. H., and Group, G. F. M. (2017) The GATA factor
3 revolution in hematology. *Blood* **129**, 2092-2102
- 4 2. Tsai, F. Y., Keller, G., Kuo, F. C., Weiss, M., Chen, J., Rosenblatt, M., Alt, F. W.,
5 and Orkin, S. H. (1994) An early haematopoietic defect in mice lacking the
6 transcription factor GATA-2. *Nature* **371**, 221-226
- 7 3. Spinner, M. A., Sanchez, L. A., Hsu, A. P., Shaw, P. A., Zerbe, C. S., Calvo, K.
8 R., Arthur, D. C., Gu, W., Gould, C. M., Brewer, C. C., Cowen, E. W., Freeman,
9 A. F., Olivier, K. N., Uzel, G., Zelazny, A. M., Daub, J. R., Spalding, C. D.,
10 Claypool, R. J., Giri, N. K., Alter, B. P., Mace, E. M., Orange, J. S., Cuellar-
11 Rodriguez, J., Hickstein, D. D., and Holland, S. M. (2014) GATA2 deficiency: a
12 protean disorder of hematopoiesis, lymphatics, and immunity. *Blood* **123**, 809-
13 821
- 14 4. Johnson, K. D., Hsu, A. P., Ryu, M. J., Wang, J., Gao, X., Boyer, M. E., Liu, Y.,
15 Lee, Y., Calvo, K. R., Keles, S., Zhang, J., Holland, S. M., and Bresnick, E. H.
16 (2012) Cis-element mutated in GATA2-dependent immunodeficiency governs
17 hematopoiesis and vascular integrity. *J Clin Invest* **122**, 3692-3704
- 18 5. Johnson, K. D., Kong, G., Gao, X., Chang, Y. I., Hewitt, K. J., Sanalkumar, R.,
19 Prathibha, R., Ranheim, E. A., Dewey, C. N., Zhang, J., and Bresnick, E. H.
20 (2015) Cis-regulatory mechanisms governing stem and progenitor cell
21 transitions. *Sci Adv* **1**, e1500503
- 22 6. Yamazaki, H., Suzuki, M., Otsuki, A., Shimizu, R., Bresnick, E. H., Engel, J. D.,
23 and Yamamoto, M. (2014) A remote GATA2 hematopoietic enhancer drives

- 1 leukemogenesis in inv(3)(q21;q26) by activating EVI1 expression. *Cancer Cell*
2 **25**, 415-427
- 3 7. Groschel, S., Sanders, M. A., Hoogenboezem, R., de Wit, E., Bouwman, B. A.,
4 Erpelinck, C., van der Velden, V. H., Havermans, M., Avellino, R., van Lom, K.,
5 Rombouts, E. J., van Duin, M., Dohner, K., Beverloo, H. B., Bradner, J. E.,
6 Dohner, H., Lowenberg, B., Valk, P. J., Bindels, E. M., de Laat, W., and Delwel,
7 R. (2014) A single oncogenic enhancer rearrangement causes concomitant EVI1
8 and GATA2 deregulation in leukemia. *Cell* **157**, 369-381
- 9 8. Mehta, C., Johnson, K. D., Gao, X., Ong, I. M., Katsumura, K. R., McIver, S. C.,
10 Ranheim, E. A., and Bresnick, E. H. (2017) Integrating Enhancer Mechanisms to
11 Establish a Hierarchical Blood Development Program. *Cell Rep* **20**, 2966-2979
- 12 9. Soukup, A. A., Zheng, Y., Mehta, C., Wu, J., Liu, P., Cao, M., Hofmann, I., Zhou,
13 Y., Zhang, J., Johnson, K. D., Choi, K., Keles, S., and Bresnick, E. H. (2019)
14 Single-nucleotide human disease mutation inactivates a blood-regenerative
15 GATA2 enhancer. *J Clin Invest* **129**, 1180-1192
- 16 10. Johnson, K. D., Conn, D. J., Shishkova, E., Katsumura, K. R., Liu, P., Shen, S.,
17 Ranheim, E. A., Kraus, S. G., Wang, W., Calvo, K. R., Hsu, A. P., Holland, S. M.,
18 Coon, J. J., Keles, S., and Bresnick, E. H. (2020) Constructing and
19 deconstructing GATA2-regulated cell fate programs to establish developmental
20 trajectories. *J Exp Med* **217**
- 21 11. Kim, S., Bagadia, P., Anderson, D. A., 3rd, Liu, T. T., Huang, X., Theisen, D. J.,
22 O'Connor, K. W., Ohara, R. A., Iwata, A., Murphy, T. L., and Murphy, K. M.
23 (2020) High Amount of Transcription Factor IRF8 Engages AP1-IRF Composite

- 1 Elements in Enhancers to Direct Type 1 Conventional Dendritic Cell Identity.
2 *Immunity* **53**, 759-774 e759
- 3 12. Becker, A. M., Michael, D. G., Satpathy, A. T., Sciammas, R., Singh, H., and
4 Bhattacharya, D. (2012) IRF-8 extinguishes neutrophil production and promotes
5 dendritic cell lineage commitment in both myeloid and lymphoid mouse
6 progenitors. *Blood* **119**, 2003-2012
- 7 13. Li, L., Jin, H., Xu, J., Shi, Y., and Wen, Z. (2011) Irf8 regulates macrophage
8 versus neutrophil fate during zebrafish primitive myelopoiesis. *Blood* **117**, 1359-
9 1369
- 10 14. Yanez, A., and Goodridge, H. S. (2016) Interferon regulatory factor 8 and the
11 regulation of neutrophil, monocyte, and dendritic cell production. *Curr Opin*
12 *Hematol* **23**, 11-17
- 13 15. Schlitzer, A., Sivakamasundari, V., Chen, J., Sumatoh, H. R., Schreuder, J.,
14 Lum, J., Malleret, B., Zhang, S., Larbi, A., Zolezzi, F., Renia, L., Poidinger, M.,
15 Naik, S., Newell, E. W., Robson, P., and Ginhoux, F. (2015) Identification of
16 cDC1- and cDC2-committed DC progenitors reveals early lineage priming at the
17 common DC progenitor stage in the bone marrow. *Nat Immunol* **16**, 718-728
- 18 16. Cytlak, U., Resteu, A., Pagan, S., Green, K., Milne, P., Maisuria, S., McDonald,
19 D., Hulme, G., Filby, A., Carpenter, B., Queen, R., Hambleton, S., Hague, R.,
20 Lango Allen, H., Thaventhiran, J. E. D., Doody, G., Collin, M., and Bigley, V.
21 (2020) Differential IRF8 Transcription Factor Requirement Defines Two
22 Pathways of Dendritic Cell Development in Humans. *Immunity* **53**, 353-370 e358

- 1 17. Yanez, A., Coetzee, S. G., Olsson, A., Muench, D. E., Berman, B. P., Hazelett,
2 D. J., Salomonis, N., Grimes, H. L., and Goodridge, H. S. (2017) Granulocyte-
3 Monocyte Progenitors and Monocyte-Dendritic Cell Progenitors Independently
4 Produce Functionally Distinct Monocytes. *Immunity* **47**, 890-902 e894
- 5 18. Sasaki, H., Kurotaki, D., Osato, N., Sato, H., Sasaki, I., Koizumi, S., Wang, H.,
6 Kaneda, C., Nishiyama, A., Kaisho, T., Aburatani, H., Morse, H. C., 3rd, Ozato,
7 K., and Tamura, T. (2015) Transcription factor IRF8 plays a critical role in the
8 development of murine basophils and mast cells. *Blood* **125**, 358-369
- 9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19

1

Figure Legends

2 **Figure 1. Double mutant *in vivo* rescue system.** (A) Experimental strategy. Mice
3 heterozygous for -77 enhancer deletion or *Irf8*^{tm1.2Hm} were bred to generate E14.5
4 embryos. Fetal liver progenitor populations with select genotypes were analyzed by flow
5 cytometry. Error bars represent mean ± SEM (3-11 embryos; 7 litters). Statistics were
6 calculated using unpaired two-tailed Student's t test. ****, P < 0.0001; *, P < 0.05. NS, not
7 significant (P ≥ 0.05). (B) RT-qPCR analysis of *Irf8* and *Gata2* expression in red cell-
8 depleted fetal livers. *Irf8* primers (GGCAAGCAGGATTACAATCAG and
9 CCACACTCCATCTCAGGAAC) detected exon loss in *Irf8*^{-/-} embryos. *Gata2* primers
10 were described previously (5). P < 0.01 unless indicated.

11 **Figure 2. Elevated Interferon Regulatory Protein-8 causes aberrant myeloid**
12 **differentiation potential of GATA2-deficient progenitor cells.** (A) Representative flow
13 cytometry analysis (MEP, GP, and MP populations). GPs and MPs are distinguished from
14 bipotential GMPs by Ly6C and from each other by M-CSF receptor (CD115).
15 Quantification of the frequency of MEP (B), MP (C and D) and GP (D) progenitor
16 populations from 4-11 embryos obtained from 7 litters. Error bars represent mean ± SEM.
17 Statistics were calculated using unpaired two-tailed Student's t test. *, P < 0.05; **, P <
18 0.01; ***, P < 0.001; ****, P < 0.0001.

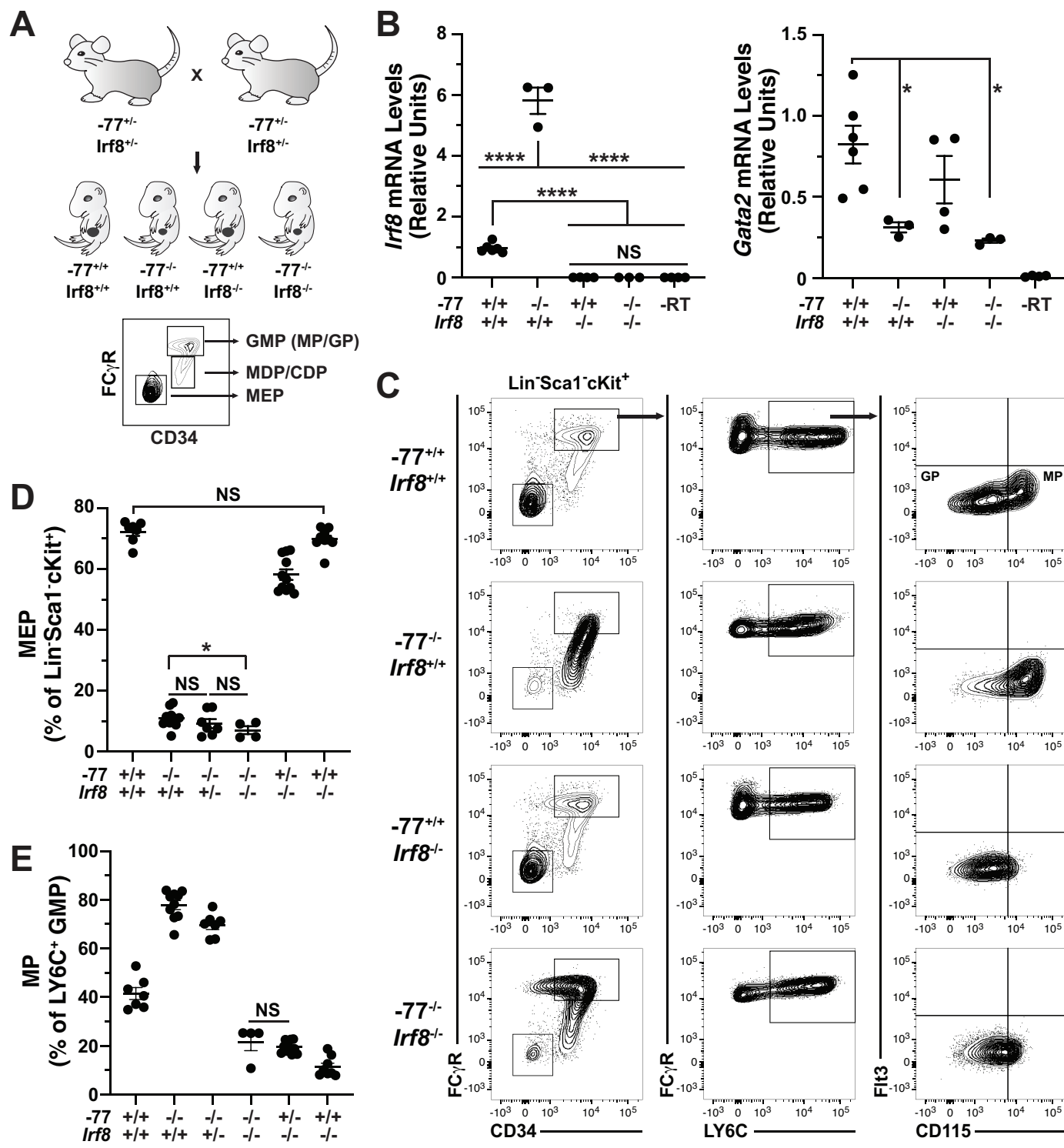
19

20 **Figure 3. GATA2 suppression of Interferon Regulatory Factor-8 levels restricts**
21 **common dendritic cell progenitor production.** (A) Volcano plot of differentially
22 expressed genes from transcriptome analysis of lineage-depleted wild type and -77^{-/-} fetal

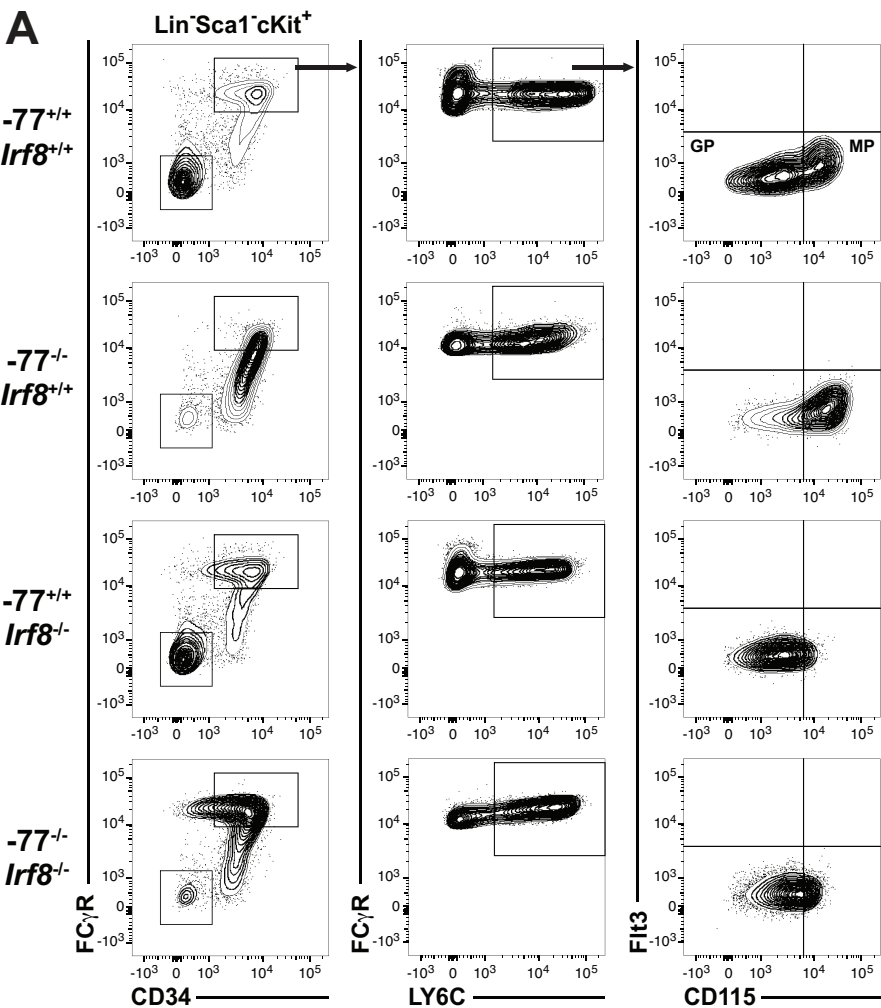
1 livers cultured for 3 d (10). GEO accession: GSE133606. DC genes included factors
2 involved in DC differentiation and/or differentially expressed in DC progenitor populations
3 (15). *Gata2* downregulation, resulting from its -77 enhancer deletion, is also depicted. (B)
4 Representative flow cytometry analysis of monocyte-dendritic cell progenitor (MDP) and
5 common dendritic cell progenitor (CDP) populations. Quantitation of the frequency of
6 CDP (C and D), and MDP (D) progenitor populations from 4-11 embryos obtained from 7
7 litters. Error bars represent mean \pm SEM. Statistics were calculated using unpaired two-
8 tailed Student's t test. P values were less than 0.01 except where indicated. *, P < 0.05;
9 **, P < 0.01; ***, P < 0.001; ****, P < 0.0001.

10 **Figure 4.** Model illustrating the function of Interferon Regulatory Factor-8 as an essential
11 mediator within GATA2 genetic networks. Physiological levels of GATA2 establish gene
12 regulatory networks (black circles) with low *Irf8* expression, which maintains a balance in
13 myeloid and dendritic cell progenitors. Loss of the -77 enhancer and consequent
14 reduction in GATA2 disrupts the network (gray circles), upregulating *Irf8* and increasing
15 proportions of MP, MDP and CDP populations. Loss of *Irf8* in the context of -77^{-/-} rescued
16 the macrophage and dendritic progenitor overproduction.

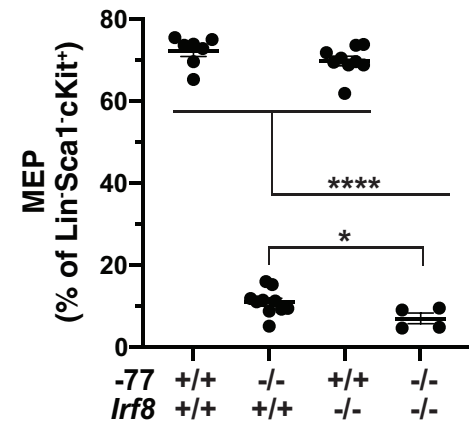
17



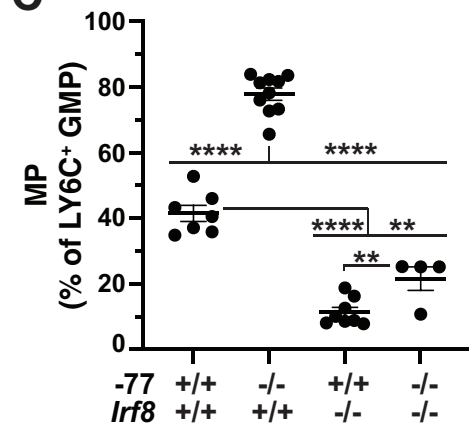
A



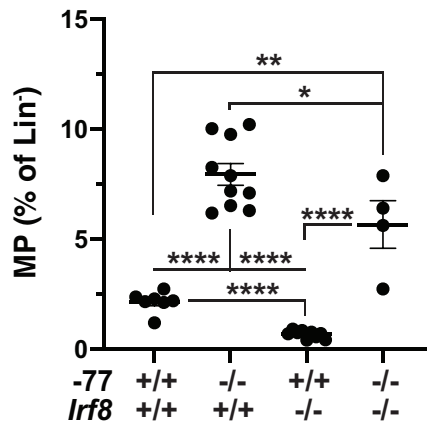
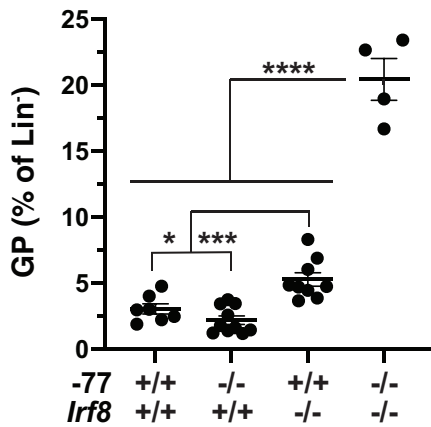
B



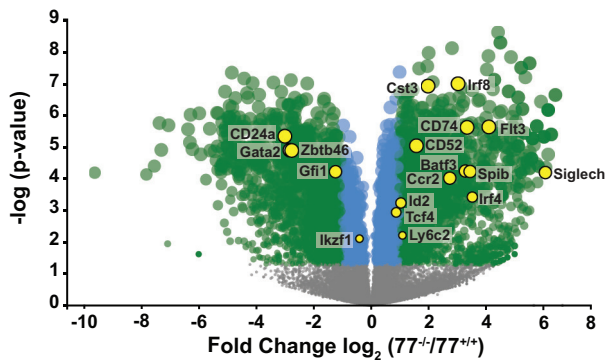
C



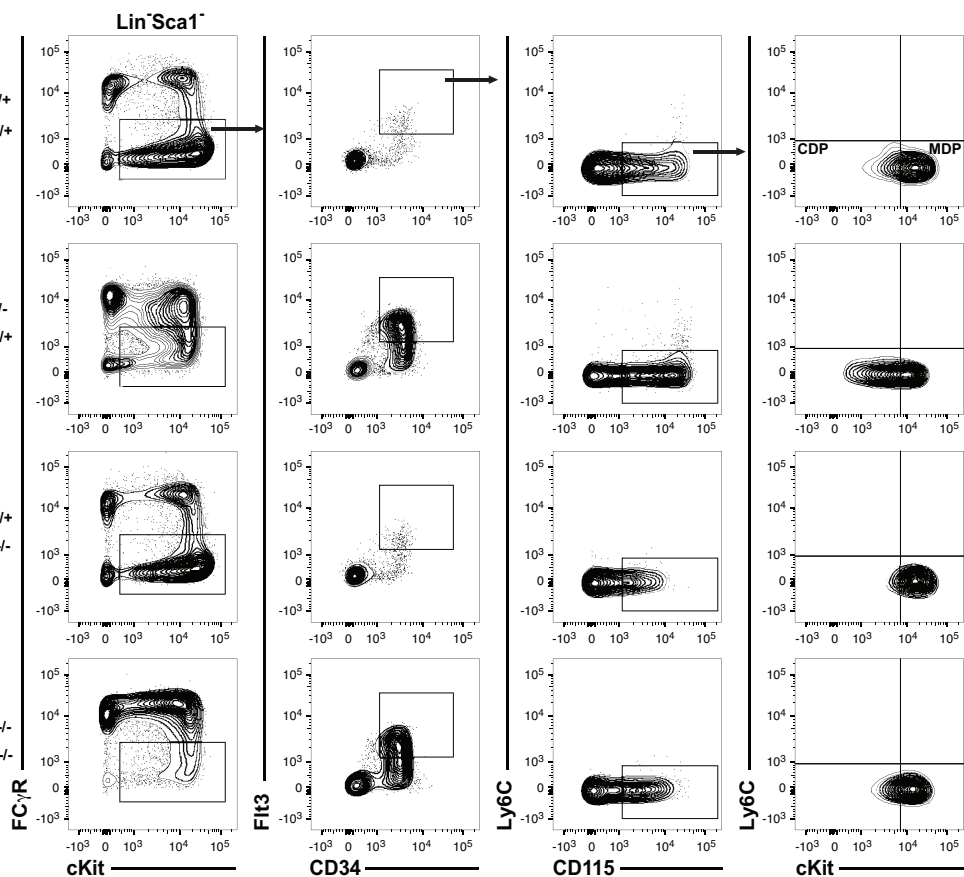
D



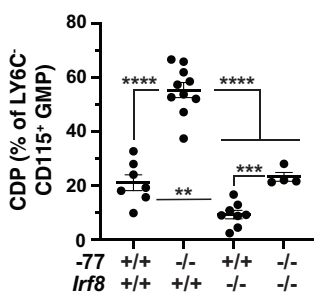
A



B



C



D

