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Investigating teacher and student effects of the Incredible Years Classroom Management Program in early elementary school[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reports on the results of a cluster randomized trial of the Incredible Years[®] Teacher Classroom Management Program (IY-TCM) and its effects on early elementary teachers' management strategies, classroom climate, and students' emotion regulation, attention, and academic competence. IY-TCM was implemented in 11 rural and semi-rural schools with K-2 teachers and a diverse student sample. Outcomes were compared for 45 teachers who participated in five full day training workshops and brief classroom consultation and 46 control teachers; these 91 teachers had a total of 1192 students. A high level of teacher satisfaction was found and specific aspects of the training considered most valuable for early elementary teachers were identified. Hierarchical linear modeling indicated a statistically significant intervention effect on Positive Climate in the classroom ($d = 0.45$) that did not sustain into the next school year. No main effects on student outcomes were observed, although a priori moderator analyses indicated that students with elevated social-behavioral difficulties benefitted with regard to prosocial behavior ($d = 0.54$) and inattention ($d = -0.34$). Results highlight potential benefits and limitations of a universal teacher training program for elementary students, and suggest strategies for future delivery of the IY-TCM program and areas for future research.

The importance of teachers' classroom management skills is well-established for supporting young children's social and behavioral competence (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Matheson & Shriver, 2005; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). Classroom management typically refers to the manner in which teachers implement and maintain order and discipline with students and the structure and supervision that affect student opportunities to learn (Oliver, Wehby, & Reschly, 2011). Well-managed classrooms are characterized by teachers' ability to monitor student attention and performance, establish behavioral expectations, and consistently

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implement rules and procedures that prevent problems from occurring (Oliver et al., 2011). Well-trained and supportive teachers who use high rates of praise, proactive teaching strategies, and non-harsh discipline foster the development of social and emotional skills that can also facilitate learning (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). Indeed, children in well-managed classrooms also spend more time engaged in academic tasks, progress at a more rapid pace, and demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement (Cameron, Connor, & Morrison, 2005; Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008).

In addition to benefits from specific teacher management skills, classroom climate also appears to impact young students' social-emotional, cognitive, and academic development (Hamre & Pianta, 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Climate includes teacher-student relationships, which have become recognized as a critical factor of the classroom environment (Downer, Sabol, & Hamre, 2010). In particular, the quality of emotional support (i.e., closeness, warmth, and positivity) that students receive from teachers has been shown to be related to their motivation and engagement, which predicts peer acceptance (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005), as well as academic and behavioral outcomes several years later (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Thus, there is considerable support for enhancing teachers' classroom management skills and strengthening their relationships with students. The present study reports on the evaluation of one program that addresses both of these goals - the Incredible Years® Teacher Classroom Management Program (IY-TCM).

1. Incredible Years® Teacher Classroom Management Program

The Incredible Years® Teacher Classroom Management Program (IY-TCM) is part of a comprehensive series of interventions including parent, child, and teacher training components that were designed to prevent and treat aggressive behavior and conduct problems in young children (Webster-Stratton, 1994). IY-TCM is provided in 6 monthly full-day workshops with two trained co-leaders and 12–15 teachers in each group. Its overall content addresses teacher management skills and classroom climate, with specific topics covering the following: building positive relationships with students and parents; proactive classroom management strategies (e.g., instructions, rules, transitions); effective use of incentives; “coaching” students' social, academic and emotional development and ability to persist on frustrating and challenging tasks, teaching calm-down and problem-solving; differential attention; and positive discipline techniques such as redirection, ignoring, and time out (Webster-Stratton, 2012). IY-TCM incorporates active learning training methods recommended for teachers (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009), including video-modeling, behavioral rehearsal of key skills through role plays, classroom practice assignments, and teacher goal setting and self-monitoring (Webster-Stratton, Reinke, Herman, & Newcomer, 2011). Peer support strategies are embedded in professional learning communities to support sustainable practice changes.

Among universal teacher classroom management interventions for young children, IY-TCM has substantial evidence of support, including eight randomized controlled trials. Furthermore, studies have been conducted by both the developer (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2004), as well as several independent investigators (Baker-Henningham, Walker, Powell, & Gardner, 2009; Hutchings, Martin-Forbes, Daley, & Williams, 2013; McGilloway et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2014; Raver et al., 2009). Across studies, results consistently demonstrate benefits on both observational and self-report measures of harsh/critical and warm/responsive behavior, use of praise and social-emotional instruction, and effectiveness of commands and discipline strategies. Improvements are typically seen in students' emotion regulation, social skills and social problem-solving, cooperation, and problem behaviors including aggression, with larger effects observed for children at higher risk levels.

Despite these encouraging findings, there are several limitations to the existing IY-TCM research that will be addressed in the present study. First, previous studies have generally included intervention components in addition to IY-TCM, such as a parenting program, child curriculum, or intensive classroom coaching (Morris et al., 2014; Raver et al., 2009). In fact, only one published randomized controlled trial (RCT) examined IY-TCM as an independent intervention without coaching (Hutchings et al., 2013), with positive effects seen on teacher and child behaviors in a sample of children aged 3–7 years (average age of 4.8 years). More specifically, the Hutchings study showed significant effects on teacher positive behaviors and commands (but not negative teacher behaviors) and on three of six observed child classroom behaviors. Second, the majority of participants in prior studies were preschool teachers, who may differ from early elementary teachers in important ways. For instance, they might possess fewer classroom management skills (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) and have less experience with positive behavior support systems (Benedict, Horner, & Squires, 2007). Relatedly, the majority of students examined in prior work appear to come from adverse backgrounds (e.g., high poverty schools in urban areas) or have clearly identified risk behaviors. Whether IY-TCM may provide comparable benefits to lower risk, older populations is unknown.

Given the novel implementation of IY-TCM in this study, it is important to consider its acceptability for early elementary teachers working in diverse schools with students who are both at-risk and low risk. There are several aspects of IY-TCM which may enhance acceptability, including its collaborative approach, use of a group format which facilitates teacher peer support and learning, and its flexibility in addressing teacher concerns and needs (Webster-Stratton et al., 2011). Prior research on IY-TCM has indicated that teachers perceive the strategies taught to be useful (Carlson, Tired, Bender, & Benson, 2011; Williford & Shelton, 2008), although this is based on preschool teachers working in low-income settings. It is certainly possible that early elementary teachers may have different experiences or perceptions related to differences in pre-service training or in increased accountability for academic outcomes at the elementary level. Indeed, prior evaluation of IY-TCM in combination with the IY classroom skills curriculum indicated that Head Start teachers needed a higher level of training support than did kindergarten and first grade teachers (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). Should IY-TCM prove efficacious for the population targeted in this study, information on its acceptability would be important for future dissemination efforts.

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