Utilizing social-emotional learning supports to address teacher stress and preschool expulsion

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A B S T R A C T

Across the United States, rates of preschool expulsion exceed those in K-12 and relatively little is known of the antecedents and consequences of such disciplinary decisions for both teachers and children. Interventions to reduce expulsion from public preschool additionally benefit teachers' workplace experiences, including reducing stress. The present study explores associations among supports and resources which promote children's social and emotional learning (SEL), teacher stress, and requests for expulsions in community-based preschool classrooms. Surveys and interviews of Chicago area preschool teachers provide rich detail of teachers' experiences accessing and using supports in ways that impact their classroom emotions and disciplinary decisions. Although teachers who utilize SEL supports request fewer expulsions, the association is fully mediated by teachers' stress. Furthermore, qualitative matrix comparisons demonstrate distinct differences in how teachers who request expulsions experience and utilize supports and manage their stress as compared to those who do not make such requests.

1. Introduction

Across the United States, rates of preschool expulsion exceed those in K-12 settings (Alaska Child Care Program Office, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Hoover, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003) and little is known of the antecedents and consequences of such disciplinary decisions for both teachers and children. Interventions to reduce expulsion additionally benefit teachers' workplace experiences, including reducing stress (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Related work indicates that teachers' feelings at work impact their perceptions of children's behavior and their perceived ability to successfully manage it (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The present study seeks to extend this literature by assessing the associations among classroom supports and resources to promote children's social and emotional learning (SEL), teacher stress, and requests for expulsions. Leveraging data from surveys and follow-up interviews with community-based preschool teachers, we aim to gain a rich understanding of teachers' experiences accessing and using SEL supports in ways that impact their classroom emotions and tendency to request expulsion.

2. Preschool expulsion

The most severe disciplinary action that an education system can take in response to a child's behavior is expulsion, or the complete and permanent removal of a child from a program or setting. In the case of school-aged children, expulsion is usually the final result of other unsuccessful disciplinary actions. Recent work has indicated that the severe practice of expulsion is happening to some of our youngest students, preschoolers. The rate in which children are expelled from public preschools may be as high as three times the national K-12 rate (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006), and the rates in private center-based preschool programs are even higher ranging from 10 expulsions per 1000 enrolled preschoolers to > 27 per 1000 in parts of the country (Alaska Child Care Program Office, 2005; Grannan, Carlier, & Cole, 1999; Hoover, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003). These rates are particularly alarming because early school discipline may have severe long-term consequences that adversely affect students in profound ways.

In elementary school samples, children who have been expelled are more likely to drop out of high school and have contact with the juvenile justice system (Lamont et al., 2013). When a school expels a child, they separate that child from the educational process, and any further educational or counseling services for the student. The child is sent back to a home which may offer little to no supervision or support if the child's primary caregiver or caregivers work full-time. Scholars and policymakers are concerned that the recently identified high rates of expulsion in preschool may be initiating the so-called 'school-to-prison
pipeline’ (Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., 2013) even earlier than previously thought. Expulsion at any age leaves children without access to education and intervention, but this trend is particularly concerning given high-quality preschool is most critical for children from economically disadvantaged homes (Bierman et al., 2008).

The decision to expel a child from preschool may be a result of multiple factors, including: the child’s behavior, administrative support, classroom resources, and a teacher’s capability to manage problem behavior. Although research on preschool expulsion is limited, studies have found that preschoolers are less likely to be expelled when student-to-teacher ratios are low (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2001) and when children spend fewer hours at the center (Pianta et al., 2005). Gilliam and colleagues have also studied the role of early childhood mental health consultants (ECMHCS) in mitigating both overall expulsion rates and disparities in expulsion (Carlson et al., 2012; Gilliam, Maupin, & Reyes, 2016). Under this consultation model, teachers develop the skills and knowledge to both address current behavioral challenges and to prevent the occurrence of future ones by improving the overall classroom climate and by fostering a social-emotional learning environment. According to one study, teachers who reported having an ongoing relationship with a mental health provider were half as likely to expel a preschooler compared to teachers without such supports (Gilliam, 2005). Though ECMHC shows promise in efforts to combat harsh disciplinary measures in preschool, issues remain regarding the potential role of early childhood mental health consultants (ECMHCS) in mitigating both overall expulsion rates and disparities in expulsion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers develop the skills and knowledge to both address current behavioral challenges and to prevent the occurrence of future ones by improving the overall classroom climate and by fostering a social-emotional learning environment. According to one study, teachers who reported having an ongoing relationship with a mental health provider were half as likely to expel a preschooler compared to teachers without such supports (Gilliam, 2005). Though ECMHC shows promise in efforts to combat harsh disciplinary measures in preschool, issues remain regarding the potential role of early childhood mental health consultants (ECMHCS) in mitigating both overall expulsion rates and disparities in expulsion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

When teachers in publicly funded Head Start programs have access to more of these supports they report feeling less depressed and perceiving children’s behaviors more positively (Zinsser et al., 2016). We anticipate that associations between available supports and perceptions of behavior would be similar in community-based centers and insufficient access to SEL supports may contribute to the decision to expel a child. This hypothesis is partially supported by prior studies showing that early childhood teachers who report regular access to just one of these supports, mental health consultants, are up to half as likely to report expelling a child than teachers without access (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006).

3. Supports of social-emotional teaching & learning

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL comprises five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, skills, and responsibility decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013). Beginning in early childhood, these competencies are acquired through interactions with teachers (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012), peers, and parents. Age appropriate competencies set children up for greater success in the realms of social and cognitive development, pre-academic achievement, school readiness and adjustment (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010); all factors which can contribute to school retention. Following a substantial body of work demonstrating the benefits of supporting such development in educational settings (for meta-analytic review, see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), education standards across the country now require teachers to promote their students’ social-emotional skills (Dusenbury et al., 2011). Despite this codification, teachers are inconsistently and inadequately prepared and supported in promoting children’s SEL (Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015). In their Prosocial Classroom Model, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) articulate how SEL instruction and supports work together with teachers’ own emotional competence and well-being to promote positive and effective classroom and behavior management. While prior research has empirically demonstrated many aspects of this model, it has yet to be applied to explain disciplinary decision making. We hypothesize that access to sufficient resources and support related to child SEL may both improve classroom behavior and enhance a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy such that he/she perceives behavior as less challenging.

In prior work we have defined several ways by which early childhood programs can support teachers’ engagement in social and emotional instruction (Zinsser, Christensen, & Torres, 2016) including: 1) access to mental health consultation; 2) access to SEL specific curricula (e.g., evidence-based curricula such as those reviewed in the 2013 CASEL Guide, http://casel.org/guide/); 3) access to classroom resources related to SEL (e.g., emotion focused story books); 4) ongoing training and professional development related to SEL; and 5) leadership support from SEL efforts. When teachers in publicly funded Head Start programs have access to more of these supports they report feeling less depressed and perceiving children’s behaviors more positively (Zinsser et al., 2016). We anticipate that associations between available supports and perceptions of behavior would be similar in community-based centers and insufficient access to SEL supports may contribute to the decision to expel a child. This hypothesis is partially supported by prior studies showing that early childhood teachers who report regular access to just one of these supports, mental health consultants, are up to half as likely to report expelling a child than teachers without access (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006).

4. Teacher stress

The mental health of the early childhood workforce has come under the microscope (e.g., Whitaker, Becker, Herman, & Goose, 2013) in recent years as the attachment-like relationships that young children form with their earliest teachers has been increasingly appreciated. In a health survey of preschool and kindergarten teachers, half of the respondents reported high levels of job-related stress (McGrath & Huntington, 2007). Many early childhood educators, especially in private childcare centers, are burdened by pressure from families, a lack of sufficient resources, feeling under-appreciated, and working long hours at relatively low rates of pay (Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell, & Breckler, 2001). It is likely that stress experienced by preschool teachers also leads to negative consequences for students, as less emotionally competent teachers tend to have students with poorer attention and greater problem behavior (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Many aspects of teacher stress have been explored, including: causal pathways to explain teacher stress (e.g., Tellenback, Brenner, & Lõfgren, 1983), how teachers cope with stress (e.g., Borg, 1990), how schools can reduce stress (Sheffield, Dobbie, & Carroll, 1994), and intervention programs for teachers who are stressed (Roger & Hudson, 1995). However, little of this research has directly tied teacher stress to their utilization of various disciplinary practices. The present study will examine the extent to which teacher stress is a contributor to their decisions to request that children be expelled from community-based preschool classrooms.

Job-related stress may undermine a teacher’s ability to provide consistent and emotionally supportive classroom environments. Teachers who report experiencing higher levels of stress in the classroom have been observed to provide less emotionally supportive reactions to children (Zinsser, Bailey, Curby, Denham, & Bassett, 2013). Stressed or emotionally exhausted teachers on the “burnout cascade” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) may be less able to maintain the social and emotional challenges in their classroom. In fact, in his ECMHC intervention study, Gilliam found that highly stressed public preschool teachers are up to three times more likely to expel a child than their less
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