

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Preventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children

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Background. Walter Gilliam's (2005) national study of 3,898 state prekindergarten classrooms revealed that prekindergarten children are expelled from school at 3.2 times the rate of K-12 students. Since then, states, policymakers, and programs have attempted to understand the reasons why. Because boys of color are most frequently expelled, some have identified implicit bias on the part of teachers as the reason. Among other factors identified as causes and correlates of expulsion of preschoolers are large class size, type of setting (for-profit childcare programs and other community-based non-profit agencies have the highest rates), teacher stress, and teacher access to mental health consultation.

Teachers expel children from preschool because the child exhibits behavior that the teacher finds intolerable. Among these are consistent noncompliance, aggressive behavior towards others, and self-injurious acts. While the factors identified above are potentially explanatory, we hypothesize that another reason that teachers expel children is because they do not know what to do when children's behavior challenges them. They do not have the knowledge or the confidence to implement preventive strategies, to intervene effectively when the child misbehaves, or to follow-up with consequences that are more likely to lesson the child's challenging behavior.

LEND Leadership Project. Based on our cross-disciplinary research, our team developed the first draft (core elements) of a curriculum for preschool teachers, designed to prevent challenging behaviors in young children and ultimately reduce the incidence of suspension and expulsion among preschoolers. This is a generational project, with a more detailed, fully developed curriculum becoming the focus of the second year.

Leadership project trainees:

- Read, analyzed and discussed a series of research articles and other resources describing validated strategies for preventing and reducing the occurrence of challenging behaviors in young children, and described their key findings in a literature review.
- Through discussion and the readings, developed a short case study describing a child who is on the verge of being expelled from preschool and the strategies which have been used to address his behavior.
- Using the case as the foundation, the team interviewed 19 trainees from 12 disciplines to elicit strategies and practices that would be recommended by their discipline's literature and practice.
- From the interviews we identified specific strategies and a series of themes which will form the foundation for a curriculum which lists and describes intervention strategies to prevent, address, and provide meaningful consequences for children's challenging behavior.

Our plan to run a focus group of preschool teachers in which they were asked to respond to the strategies identified was not carried out due to the Covid-19 quarantine.

Conclusions: Our work will form the basis of next year's project, which had been planned for preschool teachers. Participants in the final presentation suggested the material would also be suitable for families. We also concluded that our results could be described in a journal article, which we plan to draft over the upcoming summer.

Data can be viewed by writing Nancy Hunt at nhunt@calstatela.edu.