

Participants

Children. Of the 57 students in the three classrooms assigned to the waiting control group, 21 students' parents agreed to participate in the PPT project. Ranging in age from 4 ½ to 5-years-old, all students were African American. Among the participating preschool students, the majority of mothers (approximately 92%) completed high school, with several completing four-year college degrees (approximately 28%). The majority of students (approximately 74%) lived at home with at least two adults.

Preschool Teachers. Each preschool classroom was taught by a lead teacher and a paraprofessional equaling a total of three teachers and three paraprofessionals who participated in the waiting control group of the PPT project. The minimum educational qualifications for lead teachers were a high school diploma, previous experience working with young children, and a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The CDA credential is obtained following completion of an Associates degree (two years post high school). The minimum educational qualifications for paraprofessionals were a high school diploma, previous experience working with young children, and two years successful post high school training in a child development program. All of the lead teachers and two of the paraprofessionals had received the CDA credential. The teachers and paraprofessionals represented a wide range of experience (see Appendix A). Years of teaching experience with young children ranged from six to 28 years ($M = 13.5$ years). All teachers and paraprofessionals were African American women. From this point forward, both lead teachers and paraprofessionals will be referred to as "teachers" for the purposes of this paper; however, it should be remembered that these preschool teachers did not have a four-year college degree.

Kinder Training Intervention

The teachers from both schools met together for a six-hour training session. The training was conducted by two counselor educators, both of whom introduced and developed Kinder Training. The training was based on the Kinder Training model developed by White, Flynt, and Draper (1997) and supported by additional studies (White et al., 2003; White et al., 1999). During training, key concepts from child-centered play therapy and specific play therapy skills were highlighted. Teachers were taught the importance of play for healthy child development along with information related to the importance of play from the child developmental models of the Gesell Institute (Ilg, Ames, & Baker, 1981). Teachers were taught the types of children's play (e.g., play for fun, play for mastery, and play to work through developmental or traumatic events). Teachers were also taught basic concepts of child-centered play therapy including taking a nondirective stance (e.g., avoiding asking questions and leading the child's play) and being nonjudgmental and respectful.

The specific play therapy skills that teachers were asked to use during their play sessions were taught according to the acronym T.E.E.L, which includes *tracking*, *empathy*, *encouragement*, and *limit setting*. Tracking involves the teacher communicating in a nonjudgmental manner what she is seeing and hearing the child doing and saying. Empathy involves looking for and acknowledging children's feelings. Tracking and empathy help children feel understood, listened to, and important. Encouragement is the active process of focusing on children's strengths, abilities, and resources. Encouragement is distinctly different from praise in that it emphasizes a child's effort, not outcome.

Teachers were taught a specific way of setting limits that was respectful, clear, and firm. When setting limits, the teachers were taught to follow a structured procedure. First the teacher empathizes with the child and communicates understanding of the child's feelings and desires. Second, she states the limit. Third, the child is provided with choices of alternative behaviors. Choices are an important part of the limit setting process because it places the responsibility for the child's behavior on the child. Fourth, the limit is restated. The above four steps in the limit setting process is illustrated by the following statement: "You want to throw those blocks, but blocks are not for throwing. You can stack them or sort them, but blocks are not for throwing." Teachers were also taught how to use logical consequences if a child chooses to continue to break a limit (e.g., "If you choose to throw the blocks, you choose to leave this center.").

Following the didactic portion of the training session, teachers and trainers role-played using the play therapy skills and language in the classroom. The teachers alternated taking the roles of teacher and children as the trainers observed and offered assistance and feedback.

Teachers were asked to implement the learned Kinder Training skills in their classrooms for 30 minutes once a week for eight weeks during center time. Each week during the "special play times," a classroom coach familiar with the training and play concepts was present in the classroom to provide teachers with modeling, encouragement, coaching, and feedback.

Data Sources

Consistent with the descriptive, exploratory nature of qualitative research, data for this study were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews, focus group

interviews, participant observations, and written journal entries (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999; Spradley, 1979, 1980).

Semi-structured interviews. Teachers were interviewed during the beginning of the intervention and following completion of the intervention. Initial interviews were conducted to gather information about the teachers' practices and beliefs about their role as a teacher. Also, information was obtained regarding each teacher's educational background and teaching experience. Exit interviews were conducted following the eight-week Kinder Training intervention, to gather information about teachers' perceptions of the Kinder Training process; acceptability of Kinder Training; how participation in Kinder Training impacted the teacher, the students, and the teachers' relationships with their students; and potential for sustainability and generalizability of Kinder Training. Both sets of interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Focus group interviews. After the completion of the individual exit interviews with teachers, two focus group interviews were conducted. The first focus group interview was conducted at school 1 immediately following the completion of the 8-week Kinder Training intervention, and five of the six teachers participated. The questions were similar to the interview questions during the final interview. The information gained during the first focus group interview was used to confirm/disconfirm information obtained during the individual interviews.

A second focus group interview with three of the six teachers was conducted six months following the completion of the Kinder Training intervention. Incorporating a recursive methodology, the questions in the second focus group interview were informed by the data collected from the individual teacher interviews, first focus group interview,

and participant observations. The purpose of this focus group was to clarify and expand on existing data and to member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the participants.

Additionally, a focus group interview was conducted with the three classroom coaches. This interview was conducted after the teacher interviews (e.g., individual and focus group) were analyzed. Consistent with recursive methodology, the guiding topics for the interview with the classroom coaches was informed by the analysis and interpretation of existing data. The purpose of the interview was to obtain information regarding the classroom coaches' perceptions about the implementation, acceptability, and effectiveness of the Kinder Training interview.

Participant observations. Observations were conducted during the six-hour Kinder Training session with the teachers and periodically in the classrooms during the special play times. During the training session, fieldnotes were kept to provide descriptive information about the teachers' style, role, and practices as well as their initial impressions of Kinder Training. The fieldnotes included verbatim comments from the participants. This information was used to enhance and complement the interpretation of the data obtained from the individual interviews and focus group interviews. The teacher training was also videotaped and reviewed to supplement the fieldnotes.

One special play session in each classroom was observed on one occasion using a fieldnote recording form. The purpose of the classroom observations was to gather additional information about the implementation of the intervention. The observer recorded exact quotes of the teachers and classroom coaches with particular attention given to instances of the use of play language (TEEL).

Reflective journal. The classroom coaches maintained journals recording observations and experiences. In the journals, they responded to questions about the treatment integrity, acceptability, and efficacy as well as their perceptions of various dynamics that might be affecting the intervention such as the teachers' teaching style, cultural factors, classroom climate.

Data Analysis

The coding process for the individual interview and focus group interviews incorporated a variety of qualitative data analysis techniques and detailed steps including the use of constant comparison methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For detailed information about the data analysis process, please contact the author.

Results

This study examined teachers' perceptions of Kinder Training as a class-wide preventive intervention designed to improve the teacher-child relationship and enhance child and teacher competencies. Teachers were asked about their perceptions of the content, organization, and efficacy of Kinder Training. Factors influencing the acceptability of Kinder Training were also examined. The headings used directly reflect the research questions.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Content of Kinder Training

The data analysis process revealed the following factors related to the teachers' perceptions of the content Kinder Training: (a) positive experiences, (b) likes, and (c) difficulties/challenges encountered. The content of Kinder Training included aspects of child-centered play therapy, which involved taking a nondirective, nonjudgmental, nonevaluative stance when interacting with a child, the language the teachers were asked

to use during their special play times in the classroom (tracking, empathy, encouragement, and limit setting), and concepts from Individual Psychology (e.g., logical consequences and praise versus encouragement).

Positive experiences. Overall, the teachers expressed a general liking for Kinder Training. With regard to the specific language they were asked to use, three of the six teachers remarked on the benefits of tracking. The teachers indicated that tracking encouraged children's on-task behavior. Teachers also reported that tracking increased the amount of communication between the teacher and child. One teacher stated:

When we start talking to the children in another language, the child started then adding on to the conversation. So, if I say, "Well, I see you are stacking those blocks." Then they give a reason, the reason they are stacking it, and what they want to make out of it. What structure they want to build out of it.

Some of the teachers found the limit setting process to be helpful in managing student behavior. The benefits of limit setting seemed to vary among the teachers according to the severity of behavior problems displayed in the classroom. For example, during the focus group interview with the classroom coaches, two of the three classroom coaches indicated that there were limited opportunities for limit setting in their classrooms as a result of the relative cooperativeness of the children.

One of the teachers appreciated that the language used during the special play times was not demeaning or disrespectful. "If you speak a certain way and in a certain tone to children, adults too, they'll respond. You have to be respectful. You can't always expect them to be respectful to you and then you not respect them. Children have feelings too."

Difficulties/challenges. Five of the six teachers shared that they experienced particular difficulty with maintaining a nondirective stance during the special play times.

The teachers had difficulty not asking children questions and not being able to “command them for doing a thing.” Three of the six teachers had difficulty with using nonevaluative language, specifically using encouragement rather than praise language. This shift in emphasizing children’s effort rather than outcome was a significant departure from their typical style of responding to children.

See and in my day that’s the way we came through. “I see you’re building a building. It sure is beautiful. Can you tell me how many pieces...how many blocks did you use to build this building? What color are your blocks? I think you did a great job!” That was the way we were trained and to be broken from that training into what you had was very uncomfortable.

Despite this difficulty in altering the type of feedback to children, the teachers seemed to recognize the rationale for using encouraging rather than praise statements to children. The teachers reported that saying “good job” to students becomes habit-forming and it does not provide children with an understanding of *what* they did well.

This shift in language and style of interacting with children, being nondirective and nonjudgmental, represented a significant change in the teachers’ usual style and language used with children. This change was difficult for many teachers to make, and they acknowledged their resistance to change. One teacher admitted, “And so we were in this shell and you all were trying to pull us out of this shell and I think we were comfortable where we were, and I didn’t want to cross the fence. Where I was...it was safe. I was on safe ground. So it was very hard.”

One of the six teachers, Ms. N, reported experiencing less difficulty with implementing Kinder Training. This teacher described herself as “soft-spoken” and “a good listener.” Ms. N’s caring, gentle demeanor was also noted by the classroom coach: “She has a very kind, smiling, calm demeanor....She is very willing to follow the child’s

lead.” Ms. N acknowledged that Kinder Training was “different but not difficult.” She stood out in this group of six teachers in her willingness to embrace and implement the concepts and techniques of Kinder Training. In fact, she expressed a desire to use “the language all throughout the day.”

Teachers’ Perception of the Organization of Kinder Training

The organization of Kinder Training included aspects of the intervention such as (a) the amount and type of training, (b) the scheduling of special play times, and (c) the presence of classroom coaches in the classroom during the special play times.

Training. During the individual interviews, two of the teachers stated that a weakness of the intervention was the insufficient training they received. This issue was explored further during the focus group interviews and all teachers present at the focus group interviews agreed that they did not receive adequate training. “In the beginning we were so uncomfortable, and I think it was because we didn’t fully understand it at the beginning, so maybe the training needs to be more extensive so we could be more comfortable with you coming in.” The teachers indicated that a two-day, rather than a one-day, training would have been more beneficial.

The teachers also provided helpful information concerning additional elements of the training that would have been helpful. One teacher mentioned that it would have been advantageous to view a video of Kinder Training being implemented in a classroom. During the one-day Kinder Training, the teachers did view a video tape of a child-centered play therapy session between a play therapist and a child to illustrate the nondirective, nonjudgmental, and non-evaluative nature of the play sessions; however, the teachers did not view a video of Kinder Training being implemented in the classroom.

The primary reason for this was that this project was the first to implement Kinder Training as a class-wide intervention.

The teachers also suggested that additional training materials in writing would have been beneficial. The teachers were provided with copies of the Power Point presentation; however, the teachers suggested that they be provided with additional information with specific examples of how to respond to children using the T.E.E.L language.

Special Play Times. The Kinder Training intervention lasted for eight weeks, and all the teachers expressed that the length of the intervention was adequate. During the eight weeks, the teachers were asked to use the Kinder Training language and skills for thirty minutes, once a week. The teachers reported that this amount of time was reasonable, and all of the teachers reported that they continued to use the Kinder Training skills outside of the thirty-minute play times.

Classroom Coaches. All six of the teachers indicated that they enjoyed having the classroom coaches come into their room during the special play times. The presence of the classroom coaches providing modeling, feedback, and coaching appeared to compensate for the insufficient training they received before beginning the special play times in their classrooms.

I didn't get enough training to myself as far as talking to them...I would be talking to 'em, and she would come sit right beside me and tell me how to say it and, you know, it really made a big difference the way she was saying it, and they really listened to her. That's one thing they do. 'Cause if they doing something, she really break it down and talk to 'em and tell 'em, you know...toys are not for throwing. Toys are for building. They would stop throwing them, and they would start back playing with them so she really made a big difference.