

Perceived Effectiveness of Kinder Training

Changes in the children. Overall, the teachers found Kinder Training to be effective in bringing about positive changes in their students. Some of the positive changes reported by the teachers included: an increase in the children's self-esteem, reduced conflicts between students, increased class participation, improved on-task behavior, increased verbal communication from students, and a reduction in behavior problems. Four of the six teachers noted that their students were "encouraged to talk more." The students began conversing more with teachers without the teacher having to initiate conversation by asking questions.

As noted in the classroom coaches' journals and during the interview with the classroom coaches, the children demonstrated improvement in their on-task behavior during the special play times. Only one of the teachers noted this change in students; however, all three classroom coaches observed this change.

Three of the six teachers noted that behavior problems, particularly aggressive behaviors, in their classroom decreased with the use of the language. One of the three classrooms seemed to have a greater incidence of behavior problems, and these two teachers found the limit setting process to helpful in curbing those behaviors. The behaviors particularly improved during the special play times when the classroom coach was present in the classroom.

Changes in the teachers. Teachers' perceptions of changes in their approach and interaction with children varied widely according to teacher. One teacher noted that her dealings with children became more positive.

Teacher: It had an influence in the...different ways [of] talking to the children about how to do things. So, you know, "stuff is not for throwing" instead of, "put

that down, don't throw that, don't do that." And it's taught me how a better way to talk to them on a lower level.

Interviewer: And what makes you think that the way that we taught you is better than, "Stop that. Put that down."?

Teacher: Because my voice usually raise when I be like, "Stop. Put that down. Don't do that. Don't do this.", and when I'm saying it in you all's tone of voice, "toys are not for throwing," and I don't raise my voice...Because it's one of my weakness, raise my voice. Which I don't mean no harm, I just talk loud. So it kind of tones me down.

Interviewer: And in what way do you think it is helpful to not raise your voice?

Teacher: It gets me in trouble, so I should not raise my voice. And they sometimes think you hollering at the children, which you aren't. It's just my voice carries. They be like, lower your voice. You're talking too loud. So, it kind of help me stay on a lower level.

Other areas that the teachers observed changes in themselves included increased recognition of the skills and abilities of the students and recognition that children need individual attention from their teachers. One of the teachers reported that participation in Kinder Training did not influence her as a teacher.

Changes in the teacher-child relationship. Five of the six teachers did not report an improvement in their relationship with students. During the initial individual interviews with the teachers, prior to the start of Kinder Training, all of the teachers reported that they had good relationship with their students. This generally positive relationship between the teachers and students was also observed by the classroom coaches. The teacher whose classroom evidenced a higher incidence of behavior problems reported that her relationship with her students had shown an improvement.

Treatment Acceptability of Kinder Training

Data analysis revealed three primary factors related to the treatment acceptability of Kinder Training – teacher characteristics, child characteristics, and teachers' understanding of Kinder Training. These three factors appeared to have a reciprocal relationship, each one affecting the other.

Teacher characteristics. Within the factor of teacher characteristics, the sub-factors included (a) perceived role as teachers, (b) teaching practices/values/beliefs, and (c) personal-cultural traits. When teachers were asked directly about the congruence of Kinder Training concepts with their perceived role as teacher and teaching practices, the teachers all indicated that Kinder Training “all fits in.” However, during follow-up questions, two of the teachers reported that the nondirective nature of the special play times was in opposition to the requirements of their job as teacher.

Although all six teachers indicated that Kinder Training was generally compatible with their role as teacher, the researcher noted that the influence of teacher characteristics on the treatment acceptability of Kinder Training varied according to each teacher. As a result of this variation of the influence of teacher characteristics on the treatment acceptability of Kinder Training, case studies of two teachers will be presented. The first teacher, Ms. F, found Kinder Training less acceptable and, correspondingly, less effective. In contrast, Ms. N found Kinder Training to be highly acceptable, and her statements conveyed excitement and enthusiasm for the skills she learned through the training.

Ms. F served as a lead teacher and was a seasoned preschool teacher with 12 years of teaching experience. She described herself as a “firm teacher.” Ms. F’s response to behavior problems in the classroom was to give children explicit directives regarding expected behavior. “I break it down to my children and tell them I am not pleased with the way they are doing this or the way they are doing that. I break it down and we get into business... [I] keep telling them to sit down. Stop this. Don’t do this. Don’t do

that.” Her statements in the interviews also suggested that she uses threatening tactics to influence children’s behavior.

I told them, “You have time to act up? You don’t know the first letter of your name. You don’t know how to write you name. You don’t even know your alphabet, so you don’t have time to act up. You should be sitting, paying attention, trying to learn all you can learn”...I tell my little boys that now. “They going to put you out. They not going to have you in kindergarten with you doing all this and that. They ain’t going to keep you in there.” I say, “You’ll see.”

When asked about her perception of the process of Kinder Training, Ms. F. reported a greater degree of difficulty in implementing the skills than the other five teachers.

When [the children] would be doing something wrong, and you get frustrated when you try and think of what you supposed to be saying... You usually just come out saying, “Don’t hit him.”, or “Don’t touch your friend.”, or Stop hitting your friend.” When you need to come back and say, “Your friend is not for hitting.” That is kind of difficult for me.

More than other teachers, she also reported that Kinder Training was ineffective in addressing the behavior problems of her students.

Ms. N was the assistant teacher in Ms. F’s classroom and had six years of experience teaching preschoolers. Ms. N’s description of herself as a teacher was “the motherly type.” In contrast to Ms. F’s controlling, directive approach to managing child misbehavior, Ms. N. explained that she employs gentle reminders.

If you’re doing something naughty when Ms. F or Ms. N asks you to stop, just stop the first time. I know they’re not perfect. I don’t expect them to always do the right thing... “I’ve already asked you one time. Ok, did you hear what I said? Did you hear me?” That’s another thing I say. “Oh, did you hear me?” Like a goofy type... And they’ll say, alright Ms. N, we’ll pick it up.”

Ms. N did not report any difficulties or challenges regarding the implementation of Kinder Training, and she found Kinder Training to be effective in reducing children’s behavior problems. Ms. N. observed that the skills and language used during the special

play times “helped the children restrain themselves” and “helped them to remember what’s right and what isn’t right.” Ms. N. further stated that the language used during the special play times was “in my nature.”

Child characteristics. A second influencing factor on the treatment acceptability of Kinder Training was the characteristics of this group of children. Child characteristics was coded when either (a) children’s problem severity or (b) teachers’ perceptions of the children’s needs was perceived to influence treatment acceptability.

All six of the teachers reported that children’s behavior problems, particularly aggressive behaviors, presented a challenge for them in the classroom. The severity of children’s behavior problems was compounded by a general lack of effective classroom management techniques. Transitions between activities were often lengthy, which lead to times of unstructured periods during which students would misbehave. Also, teachers often provided more attention to child misbehavior than appropriate behavior.

The severity of children’s behavior problems influenced teachers’ acceptability of Kinder Training. Kinder Training did not provide teachers with an effective classroom management system that many of the teachers expressed they needed. Although teachers were taught how to set limits for children and how to use logical consequences when children did not comply with limits, these strategies alone were not successful in reducing the aggressive behaviors of the children.

Like I said, I’ve been teaching for 12 years and this is the worst class I ever had, but as far as the discipline it really helped just a little because they still kind of wild and they, you still have to tell them the same thing again over and over so it helped them a little, but I wouldn’t say it helped them a lot with the influence ‘cause these some rough boys I had this year.

Another influencing factor on the acceptability of Kinder Training was the teachers' perceived needs of their students. Five of the six teachers reported that their students do not receive adequate attention and care at home, and they perceived their role as teachers to fill in this gap and offer children love and attention at school. Ms. D explained, "A lot of times they are not getting love and stuff at home... I am just here for them. To show them support when they need it. If they got to cry or whatever else, someone they can talk to. I am here for the children, basically." This opinion was echoed by Ms. C. "Because some of them come in here – they need love, they really need hugs, somebody to talk to you, you know, and hey, that's what I am here for."

This perceived need of children for love, attention, and acceptance enhanced the acceptability of Kinder Training. The language that teachers were taught to use during the special play times and the emphasis on developing a close, positive relationship with students was valued by the teachers and provided them with additional strategies to provide their students with attention and nurturing.

Well I guess it [Kinder Training] taught me, you know, basically, you know, that kids need a lot of attention and you need to talk to them and to see what their needs are cause a lot of times kids won't, they won't talk up or actually say what is bothering them but if you make a habit of talking... That oneness, it is important...I guess it gave me greater concern or the fact that I need to talk to the children more.

Another significant perceived need of students was greater parental involvement. Four of the six teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of parental support in their child's education. One teacher remarked,

Go home and tell momma that you need to learn your address... But when they get home, Momma says, "I'm tired." "My momma said she wasn't going to help me. My momma said my teacher supposed to do that." But you see, she was the first teacher that that child seen from day one up until the time that we received the child. So, whatever he's supposed to learn, he's supposed to learn from mom.

The lack of collaboration between teachers and parents was clearly an unmet need of these teachers. As part of the larger PPT project, parents were provided with Filial Therapy training, which involved teaching the parents similar concepts and skills that were taught to teachers during Kinder Training. Despite the parental component to the PPT intervention, the teachers indicated they would “like to see more of a parental input.” “When you all work with the parents...I’d like to see more of an input...you know, more hands on with the parents. Because, I think that is where the problem lies.”

Understanding of Kinder Training. Data analysis of the individual interviews with teachers, teacher focus group interviews, and information obtained from the classroom coaches revealed that teachers evidenced a beginning understanding of Kinder Training. With regard to the specific language skills the teachers were asked to use during the special play times, teachers mastered the tracking and encouragement language more easily than empathy and limit setting. During the first focus group interview with the teachers, which took place immediately following the eight-week Kinder Training intervention, the teachers were asked their opinions about each of the four main language skills they were asked to use.

Interviewer #1: I heard you guys mention tracking and encouragement. Talk to me a little bit about empathy... What you thought about it; if you found it to be useful.

Ms. L: At first I didn’t think it was going to be useful because I didn’t know what was going on myself at that time. Once we got in there and we talked to the children about what we was really going to do, they got more interested, not only for me, it got interesting for the children too because they began to talk and say the same language you saying to the other children. To me, that was great.

Interviewer #1: What about limit setting?

Ms. C: What about what?

Interviewer #1: Limit setting.

Ms. C: limit setting?

Ms. L: Are you saying the time that they are there?

Interviewer #2: No, the setting of limits.

Ms. D: Like similar to what [Ms. L] was talking about. Like if someone was supposed to be in this center today, what we usually do is encourage them to [choose].

This exchange illustrates a lack of understanding of the concepts of empathy and limit setting. According to the journals maintained by the classroom coaches, the teachers rarely evidenced use of empathy. Some of the teachers attempted to use the limit-setting language; however, they often confused tracking with limit setting.

Discussion

Using qualitative research methodology, the results of this study provide a unique contribution to the existing literature of the efficacy of Kinder Training by obtaining African American teachers' perceptions of the process, impact, and acceptability of Kinder Training as a preventive, class-wide intervention. In addition, this study examined these variables from the perspectives of African American teachers working within a large, urban school district with an entirely African American student population.

Results of data analysis from individual and focus group interviews with the six classroom teachers and three classroom coaches revealed that Kinder Training was perceived as a moderately acceptable and effective intervention. From the teachers' perspectives, positive aspects of Kinder Training included improved child competencies. Specifically, it was reported that children's on-task behavior increased, self-esteem improved, and behavior problems decreased. Teachers also noted that children began to engage in greater verbal communication with the teacher.

Despite that teachers expressed liking for certain aspects of Kinder Training, some elements of the intervention were not found to be acceptable. Factors influencing

the treatment acceptability of Kinder Training included a need for additional training, characteristics of the teachers, child characteristics, and a lack of comprehensive understanding of Kinder Training concepts and skills. These factors were found to be reciprocal. For example, the need for further training affected teachers understanding, and teacher and child characteristics necessitated more in-depth training.

Teacher characteristics, particularly their background training and customary teaching practices were found to influence the acceptability and effectiveness of Kinder Training; however, the relative influence of these factors varied for each teacher. All teachers experienced difficulty maintaining a nondirective, nonevaluative stance during the special play times. As is the case with most teachers, these teachers were highly accustomed to asking children questions to assess their learning and to engage with students. Also, these teachers habitually used praise language (“good job”) to encourage students. Since Kinder Training represented a significant departure from the typical manner in which the teachers’ interacted with children, additional practice was needed for the teachers to achieve competence in these skills.

As mentioned previously, the acceptability of Kinder Training varied according to teacher. This finding was of particular interest since these teachers were similar on many accounts. All teachers were African American, had received their Child Development Associates Degree (with the exception of one), and were experienced preschool teachers. In fact, all teachers had received their early childhood education at the same institution. The predominant intervening factor in the acceptability of Kinder Training was the personality characteristics of the teachers. For example, the teacher who was less

directive and less controlling by nature seemed to have fewer difficulties embracing and implementing the concepts and skills of Kinder Training.

The understanding of Kinder Training represented another factor in the acceptability of Kinder Training. Teachers evidenced only a beginning understanding of the concepts and skills. The language skill of tracking, reflecting what one sees the child doing and saying, was more easily mastered by the teachers than encouragement, empathy and limit setting. This lack of mastery of the language of Kinder Training resulted in Kinder Training being a less powerful intervention technique and therefore less effective.

Teachers' poor understanding leading to a lack of effectiveness was particularly noted with the skill of limit setting. The teachers reported that limit setting was often ineffective in improving students' classroom behavior; however, the teachers observed that the children's behavior improved during the special play times when the classroom coaches, who were skilled in the language of Kinder Training, were present. When teachers implemented limit setting, the components of empathy and providing children with alternative choices of appropriate behavior were often omitted. Teachers set limits with students by tracking their misbehavior ("I see you have decided to climb on the table.") and then asking them a question that implied expectations for appropriate behavior ("What are you supposed to be doing?"). This indirect method of setting limits with children may be confusing for young children and is less explicit in providing children appropriate alternatives for appropriate behavior.

Implications for Practice and Research

It should be noted that the participants in the present study were unique and limited in number. Specifically, all teachers were African American and had obtained only an Associates degree in Early Childhood Education. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings to other teachers is limited.

The information from this research may provide guidance to school mental health workers interested in implementing Kinder Training. The influence of positive teacher-child relationships on school outcomes is well established in the research literature, and Kinder Training shows promise as an intervention technique to enhance the teacher-child relationship, improve child competencies, and build upon teacher competencies. However, when attempting to implement Kinder Training, consultants may benefit from attention to teachers' educational background, personality characteristics, and already-established teaching practices and values. Teachers with minimal training in early child development and experience in teaching young children may require additional and specialized training in the concepts and skills of Kinder Training. Additionally, the characteristics of individuals participating in Kinder Training should be considered. Teachers with a more directive and controlling interaction style with children may have need of more in-depth training and additional practice and supervision. Previous implementations of Kinder Training included two days of training (Draper, et al., 2001). Findings from this study point to the importance of sufficient training and opportunities for practice in implementing the language skills. For many teachers, one day of training is likely to be inadequate.

A fundamental aspect of Kinder Training is the supervision and feedback provided to teachers following their special play times with children. Findings from this study substantiated the importance of modeling and coaching in the development of teachers' understanding and accurate use of the language and skills. Any application of Kinder Training should include modeling, coaching, and feedback to teachers. Ideally, it would be advantageous for teachers to meet in weekly supervision groups so they can learn and provide support to each other.

Findings of this and previous studies indicate that Kinder Training is a promising intervention technique; however, additional research is needed to further establish the effectiveness and acceptability of Kinder Training. The results of this study provide a description of the implementation of Kinder Training that is specific to the current context and participating teachers. While this study adds to the research literature on Kinder Training, further research is needed to determine the extent to which these findings are consistent for other participants. In particular, additional exploration of the influence of cultural and personality characteristics of participants on the acceptability, use, and effectiveness of Kinder Training is needed. Other additions to the research literature include investigation of the sustainability and generalizability of Kinder Training.