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Project SUCCEED in Head Start: A Training Curriculum Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Young Children

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project SUCCEED was a research demonstration project funded through the U. S. Dept. of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Its purpose was to develop and test an approach to assist early childhood teachers and parents to address the mental health needs of young children in their care. The project was a collaborative effort between Portland State University's Regional Research Institute, Mid-Willamette Valley Family Head Start of Marion County, Oregon, and Community Action Organization Head Start of Washington County, Oregon and ran from September 1999 through December 2002.

Some specific goals of Project SUCCEED were to:

- Reduce problem behaviors at home and in the classroom,
- Increase social, cognitive, and emotional competence,
- Increase family empowerment & advocacy,
- Increase adults' skills and confidence in helping children with challenging behaviors, and
- Reduce parent and teacher stress.

In order to reach these goals, Project SUCCEED developed a 12-week curriculum focused on helping family members and Head Start staff effectively intervene with children that demonstrated challenging behaviors such as throwing tantrums, physical aggression, and extreme withdrawal. SUCCEED developed its curriculum with the guiding principles

of participation, comprehensiveness, replication, inclusion and collaboration. Additionally, SUCCEED relied on family members as well as Head Start staff to review and revise the curriculum and to serve as peer trainers during the process. Another important feature of SUCCEED was the one-on-one coaching that participating teachers received six times during the program.

Previously reported findings of Project SUCCEED (Friesen et al., 2004) indicated that all participants rated classes as meeting their needs “very well” or “well” and that participants valued holding joint English-Spanish groups rather than separating the training by language. Additionally, participants found the small group exercises helpful and valued the parent-teacher workgroups for creating a tailored curriculum.

RESEARCH FOCUS, PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT & DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The focus of this presentation was on how Project SUCCEED influenced stress levels of parents and teachers of children with challenging behaviors. The data were collected during the 2001-2002 school year from 18 teachers and assistant teachers and from parents of 136 children.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Prior to individual family recruitment, SUCCEED staff collaborated with Community Action (Washington County) Head Start administrators to select potential intervention and comparison classrooms for the ensuing program year. Each classroom needed to have at least one member of the teaching team (head teacher, assistant teacher, or classroom aide) agree to participate in the training program. Six of eight identified comparison classrooms and all eight nominated intervention classrooms elected to take part in this program.

At the start of the 2001-2002 program year, families were informed about the project through flyers, presentations at parent meetings, and teacher reminders. Of the 108 comparison and 144

intervention families eligible, 54 families from comparison classrooms and 82 families from intervention classrooms agreed to participate in the evaluation.

As part of the normal Head Start evaluation protocol, the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) was completed in the fall semester of 2001 for each child in the program. Participating intervention classroom families whose student(s) had a DECA score (subscales or total) that fell within the clinical ranges were invited to participate in Project SUCCEED. Structured interviews with families and self-administered questionnaires for teachers provided the means for gathering the remaining assessments that were part of the overall project. At the conclusion of Project SUCCEED, Time 2 interviews were scheduled and completed by early summer 2002.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

The 136 children included in the study were evenly split across gender and ranged from 3 to 5 years old (mean = 4.38, SD = .65). The overall study had six comparison classrooms with a total of 54 children and eight intervention classrooms with 82 children. However, as noted above, the invitation to participate in the training program was only extended to parents of children with a DECA Behavioral Concerns subscale score over 60. A score of 60 or above is considered to be in the clinical (or ‘concern’) range. Therefore, some children in the intervention classrooms did not receive what we referred to as “full intervention.” Full intervention for us meant that a member of the teaching team from the child’s classroom as well as the child’s parent attended at least six of the twelve weeks of the program. 65% of the parents chose to complete a Spanish version of the assessment instruments; however, some bilingual parents whose first language was Spanish completed the English version of the instruments.

After initial analysis revealed significant differences between scores on instruments completed in Spanish and English, it was decided that instead of comparing groups strictly by intervention and comparison

classrooms, we would incorporate the language of the assessment into the grouping. Therefore, subsequent analysis had four groups: Intervention/English, Intervention/Spanish, Comparison/English, and Comparison/Spanish. When considering the distribution of children with challenging behaviors across these four groups, we found that a total of 87 students had a DECA score over 60. The percent of children with a DECA over 60 for each group ranged from 42% in the Comparison/Spanish to 71% in the Comparison/English. The intervention groups had either 64% or 65% of children with a DECA over 60.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: TEACHER STRESS

Seventeen teachers from eight intervention and six comparison classrooms were asked to complete two different teacher stress measures. The first measure was a global measure of their stress as a teacher. The second measure, which will be discussed later, was child-specific stress and compared ‘challenging’ children to ‘typical’ children.

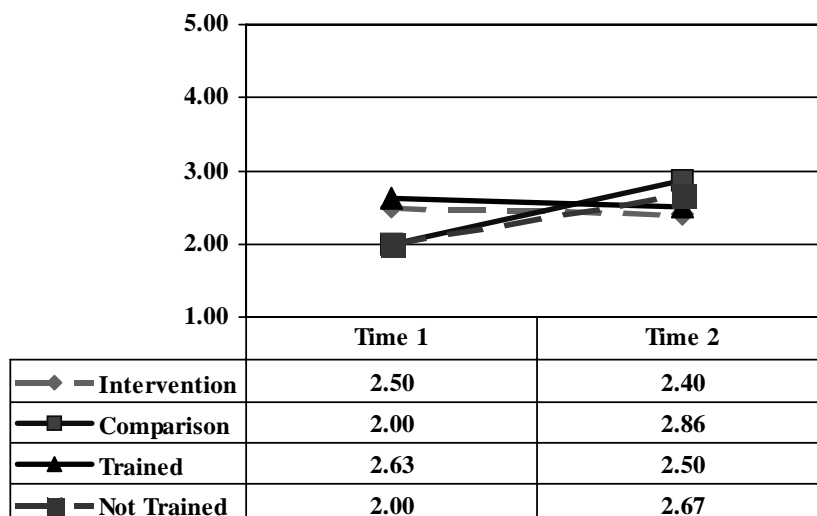
For analysis purposes and because of design complications, this analysis was conducted twice. First, teachers were grouped by intervention classroom or comparison classroom. The second time,

teachers were grouped by whether they personally participated in the training sessions. The second analysis was needed because there were instances in which the classroom representative during the training was not the lead teacher but an aide.

When asked, “Overall, my role as a teacher is stressful” on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) there was no statistically significant difference between groups. Please refer to Figure 1. Teachers who were in an intervention classroom at the beginning of the study scored 2.50 and at the end scored 2.40. For teachers in comparison classrooms, their average score was 2.00 and increased to 2.86. Trained teachers scored slightly higher at Time 1 (2.63) than non-trained teachers (2.00). However, trained teachers decreased to 2.50 at Time 2 while non-trained teachers increased to 2.67. While these patterns were non-significant, teachers in the intervention classrooms as well as trained teachers showed a decrease in overall stress while teachers in comparison classrooms or non-trained teachers showed slight increases in reported stress.

In order to examine stress specifically related to children with challenging behaviors versus stress related to typical children, an adapted version of the

Figure 1. Teacher Response to, “Overall my role as a teacher is stressful,” by classroom condition and training participation levels.



Index of Teaching Stress (Greene, Abidin, & Kmetz, 1997) was used. Adaptations with permission to the original measure included changing ten items to be scored in the positive direction. Each teacher completed four measures at both time points—two for challenging children and two for typical children. Analysis was conducted based on Training (Trained vs. Not Trained) and Child Type (challenging vs. typical).

Reliability and factor analysis of the revised scale found four subscales: Concerns about home & parent ($\alpha=.77$); Need for resources availability ($\alpha=.72$); Negative response to the child ($\alpha=.96$); and Positive response to the child ($\alpha=.83$). Two of the items in the original Index of Teaching Stress were not included in our final scale due to low factor loadings.

The grouping for this analysis was based on teacher participation in SUCCEED's training (trained vs. not trained) as well as the type of child being asked about (challenging vs. typical). This resulted in four different groups. The purpose of the grouping was to determine the effect that training and the type of child affected teacher stress.

The first of the four subscales, Concerns about the Home/Parent, was a five-item subscale with a possible range 5-25. In this subscale, higher values indicate a higher level of teacher concern about the Home/Parent. Example items include "I feel this child comes from a very poor home situation", and "I feel supported by this child's parents" (recoded). A three-way repeated measure ANOVA found a statistically significant decrease in this subscale score across time [$F_{(1, 48)} = 14.93, p < .01$] and by child type [$F_{(1, 48)} = 6.418, p < .05$]. The average Time 1 subscale score for the four groups was 12.43; this decreased to 10.93 at the end of the program.

The second subscale was Need for Resources. This subscale was also a five-item scale with a possible range between 5-25 with higher scores indicating more need for resources. Example items included needing more help with a student than the teacher was provided or receiving less support than she or he expected. There was no statistically significant

difference found between the groups described above. The average Time 1 score was 10.05, while the Time 2 mean score was 10.02. This non-significant finding was not surprising as all the Head Start teachers had multiple resources available to them to assist in their classroom and in helping children with challenging behaviors.

The third subscale, Negative Response to Child was a 23-item subscale with a possible range of 23-115. Higher values indicate a higher level of negative response to the child. Example items include, "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as this child's teacher," and "I have doubts about my ability to handle being this student's teacher." While there was a significant difference based on child type, there was no significant difference over time. Challenging children received an average score of 57.00 while typical children received an average score of 32.00 at Time 1. At Time 2 average scores for challenging children dropped to 55.2 and typical children remained stable at 31.87.

The fourth subscale, Positive Response to Child was a nine-item subscale with a possible range between 9-45. Higher scores indicate a higher positive response to the child. Example items include the child wanting to be close to the teacher and the teachers' belief that the child appreciates extra efforts expended. Again, a difference between child types was seen with challenging children being rated differently than typical children not dependent on teacher training. However, an statistically significant overall change over time was not found. The average score for typical children was 34.55 at Time 1 and decreased slightly to 33.65. Challenging children had a lower Time 1 rating with an average score of 27.06 with an increase to 28.89 at Time 2. This interesting pattern, although not significant, suggests that Positive Responses to the Child increased with challenging children, but remained constant when considering typical children.

To summarize the teacher stress findings, across all the subscales, Challenging Children were rated differently than Typical Children, independent of

teacher training. Also, all groups decreased in the Concerns About Home/Parent Subscale. While the reported Need for Resources remained nearly constant across groups, the rating of Negative Responses to difficult children were higher for both trained and not trained teachers. Difficult children were initially rated lower for positive responses but this increased over time.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: PARENT STRESS

Since parental participation was a key element of the design of Project SUCCEED, participants were broken into three groups for this analysis. The three groups were: Full Intervention, meaning that a parent and a teacher from the child's classroom attended more than six training sessions; Partial Intervention, meaning that the parents attended less than six training sessions; and finally, the comparison group. When these three groups are mapped on the language of the parent that completed the assessments, we found a fairly equal distribution of language across the levels of intervention ranging from 11 to 14 children in each group, with the exception of only four English-speaking subjects in the Full Intervention category.

The outcome variables in this analysis were from the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (Abidin, 1990). Within this standardized measure there are three subscales that are based on percentile ranking: Parent Distress, Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, and Difficult Child. These three subscales can be used to create a Total Parent Stress Summary Score.

When considering subscale and total scores by language and levels of participation in the program, there was a non-significant program effect for those participants that took the English version of instruments. We speculate that these non-significant findings are related to the fact that only four participants received the full intervention and took the assessment in English. Even so, patterns of change from Time 1 to Time 2 indicated that Parental Distress decreased for partial and full intervention participants, and increased for participants in the comparison group. When considering the Parent-

Child Dysfunctional Interaction subscale, there was an inconclusive pattern to participation in the program. For the Difficult Child subscale, participation in the program (both full and partial) showed a slight increase in percentile rank while participants in the comparison group, the percentile rank slightly dropped. Considering the specific subscale findings, it was not surprising that the Total Parent Stress score was also inconsistent. It is important to note here that while participants who chose to take the assessment in English showed no statistically significant change over time, even taking into consideration levels of program participation, we believe that the very small sample size is influencing these findings.

When considering program effects for participants that chose to complete the assessments in Spanish, a very different pattern emerged on the PSI-SF subscales and total score. In all cases, irrespective of level of program participation (including comparison group membership) participants who chose a Spanish translation show statistically significant decrease in percentile ranking from Time 1 to Time 2. At this time, we are unsure of the reasons for this finding. We can only speculate that there are larger influences that are driving the change in Spanish group. It may be that other services that Head Start offers to Spanish-speaking families are influencing both intervention and comparison families confounding the results for Project SUCCEED.

DISCUSSION

Due to the nature of the program and the research design, there are several limitations of this research. Specific limitations include possible selection bias, history, teacher training, teacher experience, and non-equivalent comparison groups. However, the largest issue was the small sample size. During the program implementation, this did not appear to be an issue as we had adequate numbers of children in classrooms. However, once we began examining the data at smaller and smaller increments, this became a challenge.

Another issue that may have contributed to inconclusive results was that in some cases assistant teachers or classroom aides attended the training, not the head classroom teacher. It is highly likely that the intervention was not powerful enough to influence the head teacher through the aide's participation. Additionally, there was no direct child-level intervention, nor was coaching offered to parents in their homes (as it was within participating classrooms). Thus, while we relied on child-level outcomes, such as the DECA, we failed to intervene directly in addressing children's behavior.

Furthermore, during data analysis it was found that the Spanish translation of materials had a massive impact on this study. Results indicated a translation effect, instead of an intervention effect. Further research is currently being done to explore this profound effect on our results and make recommendations for future work involving translation of standardized materials. Similarly, it may be that Washington County's Spanish speaking services were so powerful that they overrode the specific questions being addressed here.

Overall, our findings suggest that the SUCCEED training program holds promise for decreasing teacher and parent stress. However, in order to demonstrably decrease challenging behavior in young children, an

even more focused approach is needed with parents, teachers, and the children themselves.

MORE INFORMATION ON PROJECT SUCCEED

More information on Project SUCCEED, including copies of the curriculum and full slides from this presentation, can be found at <http://www.rri.pdx.edu/pgProjectSUCCEED.shtml>

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