

Prepandemic Teacher Perceptions of their 2019-2020 K1 Class Readiness

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Abstract

This study investigated Kindergarten and Grade One teachers' (K1) perception of their students' academic, motor, and social emotional behavior before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is the first part of a larger longitudinal study into teacher perceptions of the impact the pandemic has had on students. This report is intended to provide an overview of the problems faced by this unique cohort of students. The study provides survey and observational data regarding teacher academic, motor, social, emotional, and behavioral readiness of students in the K1 2019-2020 cohort before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study surveyed 85 (n=85) K1 teachers from across the United States (54 Kindergarten teachers and 35 Grade One teachers). The survey blended Likert survey questions with inputs for comments related to teachers' perceptions of student functioning. The study found significantly high numbers of teachers were concerned about the safety and emotional well being of their students before the outbreak. Written responses indicated many K1 teachers faced significant problems managing the demands of the academic curriculum, written work, and social emotional development of the children in their care just as the world was being forced to lock down in response to the pandemic.

Keywords: Kindergarten, Grade One, Academic Readiness, Gross and Fine Motor, Social, Emotional, Behavior, Teacher Observations

Rational and Literature Review

This study was prompted by anecdotal observations made by teachers working in substantially separate emotional/behavioral classrooms in southeastern Massachusetts. It was observed by these specialized teachers that there had been a pronounced rise in the number of very young students being referred to their programs in recent years. This was surprising due to the intensity of dysregulated behavior that must be demonstrated for these referrals to occur. Further anecdotal observations suggested that K1 classrooms in other districts were seeing an increase in students struggling with academics, behaviors, and social emotional functioning during these formative years.

Researchers have increasingly identified the role that trauma (Finkelhor et al., 2011; Juster et al., 2010; Sapolsky, 2017), poverty (Holtz et al., 2015; Solantaus et al., 2004), and neglect (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Corrigan & Rao, 2012; Siu et al., 2007) in impairing social emotional development. Prenatal opioid and cannabis exposure have also been associated with learning and behavioral pathology in later childhood (Jantzie et al. 2020; Paul et al., 2020). Parenting styles (Agbaria, 2020) and the widespread use of technology (Dresp-Langley, 2020; Hollis et al., 2020) have also been implicated in abnormal human development and learning. Even subtle environmental factors, such as attending dilapidated school buildings (Haney, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2018) or social factors like those related to learned helplessness (Abramso et al., 1978) and stereotype threat (Foy, 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1995) have also been shown to impact student performance.

Richman et al., in 1976, placed the number of students suffering from major emotional disabilities at 7%. By 1985, Verhulst et al., estimated the number being as high as 26%. Several studies during the 1990's (Brandenburg et al., 1990; Esser et al., 1990; McGee et al., 1990) placed the number at 16% to 20%. World prevalence of emotional disorders has also been found to have increased (Polanczyk et al., 2015). Since the 1990s, the number of preschool children in the United States who meet the criteria for challenging behaviors increased (Egger & Angold, 2006; GlobeNewswire, 2019) prompting researchers like Brauner & Stephens (2006) to recommended a comprehensive Early Childhood Mental Health Plan to provide early intervention to strengthen aspects of children's social and behavioral functioning (Blewitt et al., 2019; Kulkarni & Sullivan, 2019).

Methods

This descriptive study used survey research to gather data consisting of Likert scale and open-ended questions. Subjects were recruited utilizing online resources, such as direct email and educator focused online forums as well as direct interactions. Teachers were encouraged

to share the survey with colleagues to produce a snowball sampling effect. Collection of data was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the shutdown of schools nationwide.

Teachers were asked to answer both Likert scale and open-ended questions. Questions focused on teacher perceptions of their present class's functioning for the 2019-2020 school year in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, motor, social and emotional function and on readiness. Specific questions about classroom behavior, such as tantrums, physical incidents, self injurious, and violence toward staff were queried. Resource and procedural questions were also solicited.

Each Likert question was paired with a comment box allowing teachers to clarify or add insight to their answers. A four-point Likert scale questions offered the choices of: very ready, ready, some readiness, no readiness, forcing respondents to determine if the students' level of readiness was more positive or more negative. It was further anticipated that a four-point scale and questions were designed would encourage teachers to both describe their classroom observations and present their hypothesis for what they observed. All questions were piloted and developed with input from K1 classroom teachers and administrators. The survey was constructed to reduce the chances that questions would lead, bias, or confuse respondents. Care was taken to ask academically focused questions before introducing questions on emotional function and behaviors. Response questions were coded and teacher responses were compared both within and across question categories. As anticipated many identified classroom behaviors associated with social emotional function before these issues were raised in the survey. Researchers interested in the layout and questioning procedure or any of the findings may contact the writer at phulbig@lesley.edu.

Survey Findings

Of survey respondents, 40% were from urban school districts, 47% were from suburban districts, and 12.9 % were from rural districts. 51 respondents were Kindergarten teachers, 31 were Grade One teachers, and 4 identified as teaching multi year blended K1 classrooms. Respondents had between 1 and 31 years of teaching experience, with the mean being 11 years of teaching experience. Classroom sizes ranged from 5 to 48 students with 21 being the average class size of respondents. While most classrooms were supported by at least one paraprofessional, some reported as many as four paraprofessionals supporting them. However, 35 of the 85 respondents reported receiving no paraprofessional support.

The survey investigated three areas of academic function: reading, writing, and mathematics. A wide range of skills is expected at this level, as exemplified by this comment, "Most

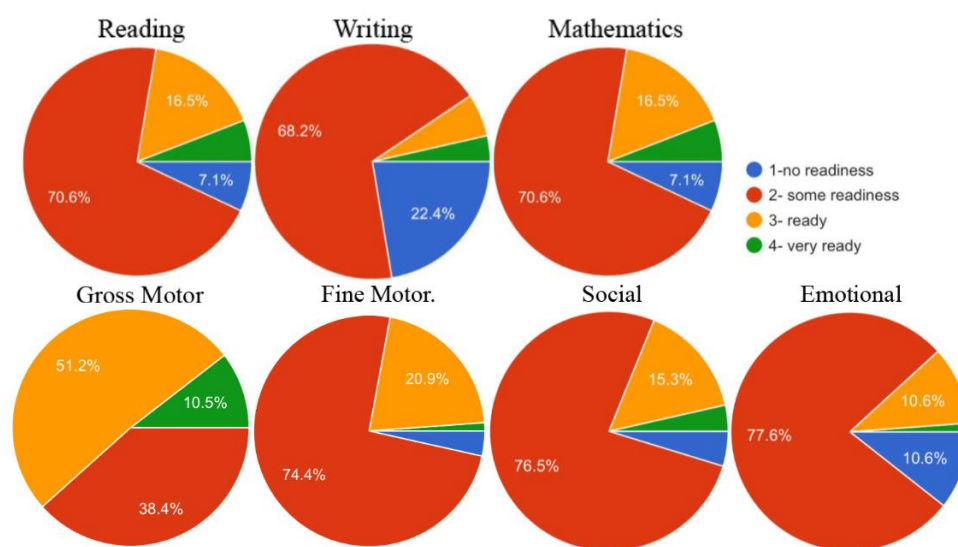
children have difficulty... Within a few months, students are able to learn some of the necessary skills to attend to interactive read alouds and independent picture reading.” However, several teachers directly identified that student readiness has been declining: “I am finding a much larger range than before.” According to the survey, 85.9% of students arrived for the 2019-2020 school year with some to no reading readiness. Only 14.1% of students entering grades K1 were described as ready or very ready. One reason that was repeatedly cited in the comments was the impact of high numbers of English Language Learners (ELL). For example: “15/27 students spoke no English when they began the school year.” A first year teacher stated: “my class is filled with mostly English learners and students who did not attend Pre-K.”

Access to Pre-Kindergarten was also identified as a reason many students arrived unprepared in reading. “For the first time I had two students who had never been to preschool or daycare.” However, another teacher explained: “Even the students coming from our district preschool came less prepared than before.” One teacher identified the negative impact of moving away from phonics based programming to promote higher level reading skills: “Students learned listening comprehension skills but not basic reading strategies. We are transitioning to a new program now.”

A similar finding was uncovered in the domain of writing, with 90.6% of students being described as having some to no readiness for writing, with less than 10% described as ready or very ready. Mathematical readiness was found to be stronger than in the verbal areas, 77% of students were described as having some to no readiness in mathematics. As identified earlier, differences in individual student readiness: “Varies drastically... some are very ready, while another portion of the class could not count to 5 or finish an AB pattern.” In sum, the survey found that most K1 teachers reported a lack of academic readiness in their 2019-2020 cohort of students in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing.

Table 1.

Academic, Motor and Social/Emotional Readiness



Note. K1 teachers observations of readiness 2019-2020

The survey also investigated perceptions of student motor function. It was reported that 61.2% of K1 teachers identified their students' level of gross motor function as 'ready' or 'very ready'. No teacher reported having a class that was unprepared in the area of gross motor function. However, one kindergarten teacher who had been teaching 31 years commented: "Gross motor isn't as strong as it used to be but it is still in the 'ready' range." Inversely, over 74% of teachers reported their students were not ready in the area of fine motor function. Only 21.2% of respondents felt their students' fine motor skills were ready or very ready. One teacher commented: "This is a HUGE problem. Many have never held pencils or crayons or played with toys that would help develop fine motor skills." Others identified a lack of resources: "I wish OT [Occupational Therapy] would be more available to students. I have several students who would benefit from services." One teacher described their greatest challenge as: "The many and high needs of my students," while having, "no paraprofessional support at the beginning of year."

77.6% of the respondents indicated they had an increased need for special education support. Coding identified three separate responses that made reference to a school policy, which would in principle exclude all K1 students from receiving special education support in academics. One teacher described the policy this way: "Sped is refusing to identify or help kids in this age range because they're not two years behind." Future research into how widely policies of this type are utilized by school districts is needed.

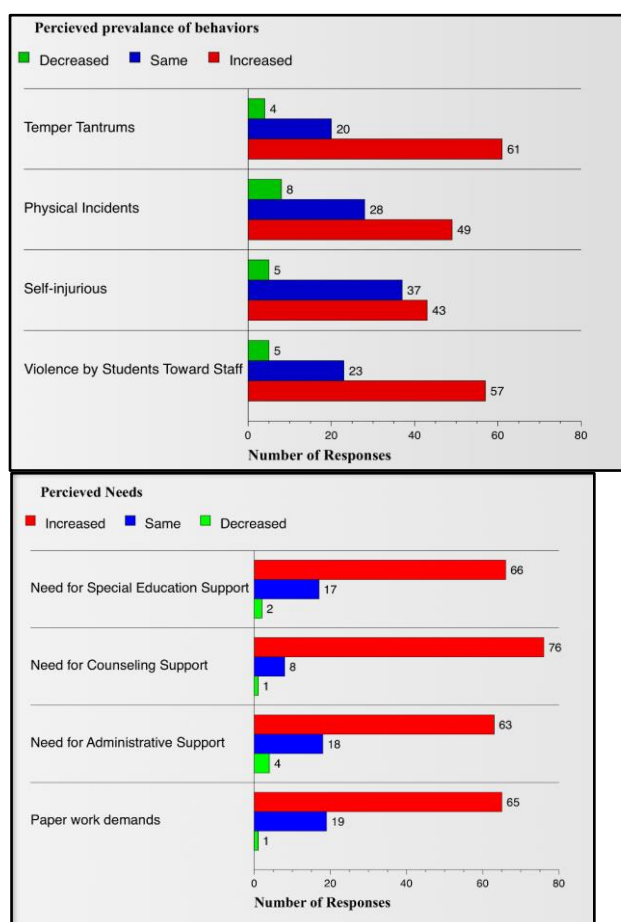
Teachers also identified a high need for counseling. 89.4% expressed an increased need for counseling support. One teacher identified their greatest challenge was: “Lack of support staff to help with all social emotional issues. We currently do not have a full time social worker or psychologist.” When asked to write about what additional support school districts could provide to help, increasing the number of counselors came up repeatedly. The issues that teachers believed counseling would address were also telling: “small support groups for children dealing with divorce, dealing with incarcerated parents, foster homes, sibling issues, drug addicted parents, etc.”

Social function was broadly defined as the ability to make friends, and understand roles and expectations. 81.2% of teachers identified their classes as having some or no social readiness: “For an increasing amount of children I would choose no readiness.” Only 18.8% of students were seen as socially ready or very ready for grades K1. In contrast to social function, emotional function was defined by the survey as more vicral and behavioral. Emotional readiness was defined as self control, attention, and outbursts. 88.2% teachers responded that their classrooms had some to no emotional readiness for grades K1. Eight teachers specifically described the students of their classrooms as having no emotional readiness. Only one teacher reported having a class that was very ready emotionally. Six identified emotional functioning getting worse in recent years: “Behavior has seemingly gotten worse in the 5 years I have taught. I am seeing a lot more students with high emotional, behavior and developmental needs.” One teacher with 31 years of teaching experience presented their theory as to why they were seeing so many students with self control issues: “If at home, boundaries are always wavering, students have to see if they will waver outside the home. When they don't, students don't have the strategies to cope.”

Specific behavioral questions were asked about temper tantrums and physical incidents. These are difficult, but not unexpected behaviors for students at this level. 71.8% of respondents reported an increase in student tantrums and 57.1% reported an increase in physical incidents in their classrooms. Two other behavior specific questions related to self-injurious behavior and violence toward staff were asked. These were hypothesized to be rare events at this level. However, half of the respondents, 42 teachers, reported an increase in observed self injurious behavior and slightly more, 66.7% of respondents, reported violence against staff was increasing. Based on these findings, future research is strongly suggested.

Table 2.

Behavior and Needs



Note. Frequency of specific behaviors and level of support of K1 students.

Teachers were asked to speak directly about their present ability to manage their classrooms and effectively complete their duties. Many of the respondents who answered positively attributed their ability to manage their classrooms to their experience: “I am not currently concerned but I feel my confidence came with years of experience.” Others noted unique situational supports, and contrasted their experiences with those of other teachers: “I am confident about it this year. But, I am an empty-nester and have the time to spend the extra hours after school. I don't know how teachers with kids manage.” Some made more grim comparisons: “I have years of experience so I am able to do it. Without my experience, my job would be virtually impossible.”

Twenty two respondents directly stated that they were highly, extremely or very concerned with their ability to manage their classrooms: “I am very concerned. There are

children who I feel I'm just not reaching...While we do incorporate PBIS, it's hard to catch kids being good when there are always others who are misbehaving." Approximately 74% of respondents identified an increased need for administrative support with challenging student behaviors. Some teacher comments pushed back against the Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) model. "PBIS has encouraged positive behavior acknowledgement, but overwhelmed (teachers) with paperwork, and with no follow-up or real consequences."

Increased paperwork was also found to place constraints on classroom management: "I find documentation is getting more onerous...With ever increasing initiatives there are more things to do, crowding into our time together as a class family." Others described: "I am concerned about my ability to complete the necessary paperwork that goes with teaching. I can manage and provide instruction and programming for my students, but lack any time to manage data, update instructional programs, and in-service staff." When asked directly about paperwork, 76.5% of teachers responded that it had increased.

The question, "How concerned are you about your ability to presently manage your classroom and effectively complete your duties and responsibilities?" elicited many strong statements from respondents that suggested heroic efforts on the part of these teachers to support the needs of their students. "I am seen as a very good teacher, I can manage my classroom well, but I am spending many, many hours outside of the school day working and it is taking a toll on my mental health." Other teachers indicated that: "The intense social emotional needs take priority over academics." "I spend 15% of my day teaching and the rest crowd managing." One teacher with 13 years experience described facing a cyclical issue: "lack of support with high incidence of aggressive behavior has led to less educational potential and thus more issues with behavior." A 26-year teaching veteran identified "I have had kindergarten students who have been a physical danger to both me and to my students.

Discussion

Teachers are observing pronounced weaknesses in student academic and emotional readiness, as well as concerning increases in assaultive and self injurious behavior. This study provides important teacher accounts and insights about this cohort of K1 students. The theme of safety came up repeatedly in teacher responses as a top concern. As one teacher described: "behaviors are not safe and therefore we are not able to ignore them." Coding found 62 out of the 85 teachers made comments that indicated they were experiencing an increase in behaviors: "elopement, violence, sexual acting out, severe distractions such as screaming nonstop, Oppositional Defiant Disorder [ODD] diagnosis)." One teacher, at the end of the survey, detailed how slow and difficult the process of getting support for students displaying these extreme behaviors were, "We have several students who...exhibited disruptive, violent

behaviors towards teachers and peers and it took several years for the children to get supports in place for them.”

Some identified their greatest challenge as: “getting parents to help with the behavior,” and identified a change in parenting style. One kindergarten teacher identified: “How they interact with adults at home and how they should interact with adults in school are very different and causes difficulties.” Others highlighted parent indifference: “Several that we deal with don't even answer their phones when called from the school.” Other teachers, particularly those from urban settings, identified social challenges: “Many of my students come from homes with overworked and overstressed families.” Some suggested a multigenerational failure of schools to support their students’ development, stating that their students’ parents: “either had bad school experiences themselves and don't value school.”

Technology was identified specifically by respondents as impacting student development. “I feel that attention issues, language development problems, and special needs are on the rise due to the increase of screen time of children and their parents.” Many teachers identified technology impacting both their students and their parents: “we attribute it (behavior) to parents being on technology and not engaging with their children academically and emotionally.” Technology was seen to limit the formative experiences of their students: “Parents are not spending time speaking to their children and interacting with them” and “are allowing technology to replace human interaction and appropriate physical activity for their preschool children.” There was also a feeling that technology was pushing students beyond what they were developmentally ready for: “Students are being expected to do more and more, even though it is not developmentally appropriate, they have less play time, if any, and less coping skills than they did in the past.

Conclusion

It is believed that considerable research into the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown disruption on the mental health of this cohort of K1 students is needed. Several researchers (Holmes et al., 2020; Mahase, 2020; Romero et al., 2020; Twenge & Joiner, 2020) have cited concern about the ability to meet the health, psychological, and learning needs of young children in the current virtual learning environment resulting from the pandemic. This research study indicates that K1 teachers already had deep concerns about the social-emotional and mental health of their students, before their formative school year was abruptly impacted by the pandemic. The study highlighted significant concerns about student social emotional function and safety. Future research into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic’s disruptions to the education of this cohort of American students is believed to be of essential importance in planning for the future educational and mental health needs of these students,

as their presentation and formative educational experiences have not been typical. This study also suggests that more resources and support need to be provided to both teachers and parents of children at this level. Considerable work needs to be done to ensure that parents and educators are working together for the best interest of their children. As expressed by one teacher who responded to this survey, “Parents assume elementary classrooms are safe for their children, often they are not.” It is imperative that educational institutions and professionals are not making similar assumptions, and that the nation is adequately prepared for the unique social emotional needs of this cohort of students.

Limitations

There are important constraints related to this study's generalizability. Being an online survey it is impossible to guarantee if respondents clearly understood the questions they were being asked. To address known limitations, both Likert and open response questions were used and piloted and answers were carefully reviewed. One respondent identified having confusion answering survey questions was excluded. Another concern inherent in all internet-based research that utilizes shareable online surveys is that the data sample can be skewed by motivated respondents. In other words, it was possible that teachers most affected by classroom challenges were the most motivated to answer the survey and most motivated to share the survey with other teachers having classroom difficulties of their own. This could have been perhaps further exacerbated by the psychological impact of the school shut down forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have also potentially motivated a similar phenomenon.

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