Children with Special Needs in the Kindergarten Classroom: Teacher Training and Perceptions of Student Readiness

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Abstract

Teacher preparation programs often include at least one class on teaching children with special needs. Yet, teachers may still feel unprepared for the variety of disabilities they may face in the classroom. Students with special needs may require additional support, even if the child has a dedicated aide or leaves the classroom for a pull-out program. In the present study, we asked teachers about their classroom composition to get a sense for the variety of needs they needed to meet. Furthermore, we asked about the degree to which Kindergarten teachers' educational background prepared them to teach children with special needs.

Hypotheses

We know that, in general, Kindergarten teachers value the social–emotional readiness of their incoming students (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). However, we examined the degree to which teachers with more special needs children may value the same constellation of skills (i.e., social–emotional skills over academic skills).

Instrument

The updated version of the Center for Early Development and Learning's Transition Practices Survey (1996). The survey contains 38 questions asking Kindergarten teachers about their perceptions of Kindergarten readiness, transition practices, teacher training and the characteristics of children in their classrooms.

Participants

In the spring of 2015, over 500 Kindergarten teachers across the US responded to an email and filled out our 38-question survey. Of these, 496 provided information about the special education characteristics of the children in their classroom. The modal age of respondents was 45 to 54 years (33%). Teachers reported an average of 11.5 years (SD=8.5) teaching experience in Kindergarten and 18 years teaching experience (SD=10) in any grade. Thirty Seven percent reported having a bachelor's degree, 58% reported having a master's degree, and 1% reported having a doctoral degree. The vast majority of teachers in the sample came from public schools (89.3%) and the remaining 11% of teachers taught at a private or charter school.

Results

Results indicate that the majority of Kindergarten teachers (59%) had at least one child receiving special education services. The most common primary diagnosis were speech or language impairment followed by developmental delay and autism spectrum disorders (*Table 1*). This indicates that children with disabilities are spending substantial amounts of time in the general education classroom. Teachers also reported on their own education background and the degree to which their education prepared them to teach children with special needs. The most common teacher certifications were in early childhood (n = 308) or elementary education (n = 438), but only 65 teachers reported having a special education certification. Teachers also reported on the degree to which their certificate program prepared them to teach children with disabilities/special needs from 1 ('not at all') to 4 ('a lot'). On average, teachers' scores were 2.46, between 'a little' and 'some.' We also analyzed the data to determine if teachers who reported more children receiving special education services prioritized social–emotional & academic skills differently upon Kindergarten entry. Results indicated that teachers with 3 or more children in their class receiving special education services did not prioritize their children's skills at kindergarten entry any differently than those who did not.

	Primary Diagnosis	% Classes with at least one child	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1	Speech or language impairment	40.9	0.92	1.38	0	8
2	Developmental delay	22.1	0.36	0.8	0	5
3	Autism Spectrum Disorders	18.1	0.25	0.65	0	5
4	Other health impairment (e.g., ADHD)	12.5	0.19	0.58	0	4
5	Emotional disturbance	9.5	0.15	0.66	0	10
6	Specific learning disability	6.1	0.10	0.49	0	6
7	Intellectual disability	12.6	0.07	0.3	0	3
8	Other	3.6	0.05	0.27	0	3
9	Hearing impairment	3.0	0.04	0.23	0	3
10	Orthopedic impairment	2.8	0.03	0.2	0	2
11	Deafness	1.2	0.01	0.11	0	1
12	Visual impairment, including blindness	1.2	0.01	0.11	0	1
13	Traumatic brain injury	0.2	<0.01	0.04	0	1
14	Deaf-blindness	0.0	0.00	0.00	0	0

Discussion

Our findings indicate that teachers prioritize the same skills regardless of the special needs status of their students and that students with special needs spend a significant amount of time in the classroom. However, most of their teachers don't have extensive training in special education. It is positive that a high number of students with special needs are overwhelmingly present in the general classroom, however, the lack of teacher preparation in regards to special education is troubling. Our recommendation is that general education teachers need to receive specialized training to deal with the unique needs of theses students

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