What Do Teachers Do When Preschoolers "Misbehave"? Family Matters

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Abstract

There are documented disparities in how preschool teachers perceive and respond to challenging behavior in the classroom. Teachers' decision-making processes when handling challenging behavior and how they include families in the process is an area that is notably under-researched. Using an experimental design, preschool teachers ($N = 131$; 93% Female; 27.5% Black) read a standardized vignette describing a child's challenging behavior. Teachers were randomly assigned to receive a vignette with the name and picture of a Black or White boy. Teachers listed the actions they would take in addressing the behavior and whether they would include families. Qualitative answers were coded using the validated Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool for Preschool Classrooms. Although the child's behavior was identical, teachers' responses greatly varied—some appropriate and others maladaptive according to published multi-tiered systems of support. Involving families in the process was often referenced as a separate step with teachers frequently placing the blame on families for the child's behavior. Variations in results by child race are also reported and discussed. Findings indicate that supporting preschool teachers in successfully implementing full tiered systems of support and finding meaningful ways to engage families in the process is critical.

Keywords Preschool · Disparities · Family engagement · Multi-tiered Systems of support · Educational equity

Both families and preschool teachers play a vital role in supporting young children's development (Sheridan et al., 2019). Given that children spend increasing time in preschool settings, how preschool teachers respond to child behavior, and how they include parents in the process, can support–or hinder–a child's development (Coplan et al., 2015). The label "preschool" refers to education settings that serve children prior to kindergarten in a group or classroom-based setting (i.e., age 3 to 5; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2023). Compared to early care and education (ECE) settings more broadly, preschools often follow a one-size-fits-all approach resulting in the needs of some children being overlooked (Schachter et al., 2022). Roughly 88% of five-year-old's, 69% of 4-year-olds, and 40% of three-year-old's nationwide attend some form of preschool (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019), with 29% of 4-year-olds and 6% of 3-year-olds attending a state funded program from 2020 to 2021 (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). In preschool behavioral challenges are common and frequently represent a normal part of development, with more than half of children no longer demonstrating these concerns upon entry into kindergarten (Olson et al., 2009). Researchers have begun to document inconsistencies in how preschool teachers perceive and respond to challenging behavior in the classroom (Accavitti & Williford, 2022; Sabol et al., 2022). The current study aims to assess the degree to which teachers follow evidence-based practices when addressing challenging behaviors in preschool classrooms and the steps (or lack of) that teachers take to engage with parents in the process.

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Previous studies have utilized large datasets (e.g., Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Perry et al., 2011) or have relied on teacher scored ratings scales (e.g., Fabiano et al., 2013; Yoder & Williford, 2019) to investigate the association between teacher responses and child outcomes. These quantitative studies have not, however, attempted to capture preschool teachers' intentions, values, or stated goals in taking the actions they do in response to challenging child behavior. To address these gaps in the literature, we designed a random-assignment experimental protocol that allowed us to collect qualitative information from preschool teachers. This study aims to learn how to equip preschool teachers so that they are ready to support young children's development, which is critical to children's well-being and long-term academic and social-emotional developmental trajectories.

Systems for Supporting Preschool Teachers in Responding to Child Behavior

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are well-established in K-12 settings and are becoming more widely used in preschool settings, although there is a lack of clear guidance for how to apply them to preschool settings (Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021). MTSS can be useful in that they combine different tiered approaches and evidence-based practices in a systematic way to target all skills common to early childhood, including behavior. In everyday practice, however, preschool educators may face challenges to accessing and using these recommended practices (Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). Perhaps the most prominent example of this challenge, is exemplified by the preschool expulsion crisis. About 250 preschool children are expelled from their classroom each day in the United States (Malik, 2017; National Survey of Children's Health, 2016) with many of these children being Black (Fabes et al., 2021; Meek et al., 2020). As many MTSSs currently stand, they do not specifically evaluate factors that may perpetuate these racial disparities.

The *Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children* is a widely used MTSS in preschool (Hemmeter et al., 2016). The Pyramid Model includes the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT™; Hemmeter et al., 2018), a well-validated instrument used to measure teacher implementation of recommended practices to support child behavior and development. In practice, the TPOT is completed by a trained assessor during the course of a classroom observation and interview with the teacher (Fox et al., 2014). The TPOT can be used to evaluate teacher use of recommended practices and highlight areas for them to improve upon. In the current study, we use the TPOT to understand how teachers respond to challenging child behavior in the classroom and the degree to which they discuss practices recommended by the Pyramid Model.

Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Child Behavior

Challenging child behavior can be a great source of stress for preschool educators, who often acknowledge the problem but feel ill-equipped to address it. In a qualitative study, preschool teachers reported feeling frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed by challenging child behavior (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2022). When faced with challenging behavior in the classroom, teachers are forced to make snap-decisions, also known as vulnerable decision points (VDPs; McIntosh, 2014), regarding how they are going to respond to child behavior. These VDPs often occur in the classroom immediately upon being presented with challenging behavior, pushing teachers to make crucial decisions about child behavior management (i.e., deciding to remove a child from the classroom; call the child's parents) while managing competing tasks. During VDPs, teachers may be more likely to make decisions that are influenced by their own biases towards certain children and their families (McIntosh, 2014). Research indicates that some teachers may hold negative perceptions and biases towards young Black children (Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Meltzoff & Gilliam, 2024). Particularly in preschool settings, educators may fall back on racial biases towards Black children in the face of insufficient resources and high job-related stress (De Los Santos et al., 2023). One factor that may influence how a teacher responds to child behavior, is their attitudes and potential bias towards *families*.

Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Families

Family engagement, often referred to as family involvement, is how families support their young child through their relationship with preschool teachers and programs (Child Care and Early Education Research Connections, 2014). Decades of research indicate that especially in preschool, families and teachers working together promotes better child outcomes (Sheridan et al., 2019). The relationship between preschool educators and families may be even more important when supporting a young child who is struggling in the classroom or who has specialized needs. To reduce challenging behavior, successful interventions often rely on a collaborative relationship between teachers and families (Spence et al., 2023). Collaborative partnerships where teachers and families can share their perspective may enhance the success of interventions across home and preschool (Turnbull et al.,

2011). However, research indicates that preschool teachers face challenges to creating collaborative partnerships with all families (Spence et al., 2022; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). If parents and preschool teachers are not able to work together to address behavioral concerns, teachers may be more likely to respond to child beahvior in more punitive ways such as expulsion (Martin et al., 2018; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2022). Due to the importance of family involvement, the Division for Early Childhood (2007) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (Steen, 2022) calls for special attention to the central role of families when identifying and intervening on challenging behavior. Despite the importance of preschool educators and families working together, many MTSSs and classroom-based practices for child behavior offer very little or inadequate guidance for teachers around how to partner with families, leaving teachers to navigate family engagement on their own (Jain et al., 2020).

Current Study

We designed a random-assignment experimental protocol to advance the knowledge on how preschool teachers manage challenging child behavior and to highlight areas in which preschool teachers could benefit from additional support, based on the data pattern observed. A key element of the experiment was our ability to *control for* the child's behavior and manipulate the child's race through a designed vignette that systematically varied. A second element is the collection of qualitative data which allows us to begin to understand meanings, feelings, and considerations expressed by

preschool teachers when approaching how to handle challenging child behavior. The study aims were: (a) What steps do preschool teachers describe when addressing challenging behavior in the classroom? (b) How do preschool teachers describe engaging with families around addressing challenging behavior? We anticipated that teachers would discuss several consensus practices to implement as the first step to addressing challenging behavior. Given the lack of clear guidance around family engagement, we predicted that there would be less clarity and consistency around how teachers engage with families in the process of addressing behavior. Lastly, we were interested in examining racialized themes that emerged within each research question.

Method

Participants

Participants were obtained through professional network listservs and school partnerships in [a Blinded state]. To qualify for inclusion, participants had to be a lead teacher serving children between the ages of 3–5 years old in a group-based credentialed or licensed school or educational setting. Teachers were not eligible if employed by a home-based early childhood provider. All participants gave informed consent online in accordance with the Institutional Review Board at [Blinded institution] (IRB # STUDY00011241).

Of the 237 people who accessed an online screener, 131 met eligibility criteria (see below) and completed the study. The various preschool settings in which participants taught were as follows: public school/Head Start (59.5%), non-profit (24.4%), and private (16%). See Table 1 for additional teacher demographics in the analytic sample of 131. Each participant, upon completion of their online responses, received a $15 gift card. Responses were collected over an approximately four-month period (October 3, 2020 to January 20, 2021). There was no missing data because all 131 teachers answered the two qualitative questions presented in this study.

Materials and Procedures

Participants completed all study materials in Qualtrics, an online survey software. After ensuring eligibility, consent, and collecting demographic data, preschool teachers were instructed, via a text screen, that they would be reading a vignette about a child and would be asked to respond as if that "child is in your classroom." Teachers were then presented with a standardized written vignette describing a child who exhibited challenging classroom behavior (adapted from Gilliam et al., 2016; see Supplementary

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the participating teachers ($N = 131$)

Demographic variable	n	Percent
Sex of teacher		
Female	122	93.12
Male	8	6.10
Non-binary or self-described	1	0.80
Race of teacher		
Asian	2	1.53
American Indian or Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian	4	3.05
Black/African American	36	27.48
White	66	50.38
More than one Race	17	12.98
Declined to Answer	6	4.58
Ethnicity of teacher		
Hispanic or Latinx	43	32.82
Education level of teacher		
High school graduate	7	5.34
Associate degree	40	30.53
Bachelor's degree	29	22.13
Master's degree	41	31.29

Materials, Sect. 1 for the verbatim vignette used). Teachers were randomly assigned to receive either: (a) a stereotypical Black boy name (DeShawn) and picture, or (b) a stereotypical White boy name (Jake) and picture (see Supplementary Materials, Sect. 2). These names were selected from prior research on racial biases (e.g., Gilliam et al., 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). The assigned child's name and accompanying picture was included for each question. For all teachers, the description of the child's behavior was controlled for and remained identical; the only word changed in the vignette was the name of the child. Immediately after reading the vignette, teachers were then instructed to answer the following open-ended questions: (a) Explain what steps you would take to address the child's behavior, and (b) Explain the steps you would take to reach out to the parents.

Procedures

Qualitative analysis adhered to the directed content analysis approach laid out by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). In line with this approach, an a priori codebook was developed by deriving codes from the TPOT. The TPOT uses four primary-level coding categories, each with secondary-level codes that are subsets of the primary codes (these secondary-codes are called "indicators"). We adopted this structure and used the following four primary codes and indicators (see supplemental Table 1 for complete descriptions): (a) Supporting children with persistent challenging behavior (4 indicators); (b) using effective strategies to respond to challenging behavior (8 indicators); (c) red flags (4 indicators); and (d) involving families in supporting their child's social emotional development and addressing challenging behavior (2 indicators).

Once the research team felt comfortable and confident with the codebook, the first and second author independently coded the same transcript and disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. The first and second author then coded the second training transcript and upon agreement, they split up the coding so that all transcripts were coded by at least one coder and 28% were dual-coded by both coders using Nvivo qualitative software (QSR International, 2022). Responses to each question were coded in entirety line-by-line. The coders were kept completely blind to the race of the child in the vignette being scored. Results from this coding assessment indicated an average kappa scoring agreement between the two coders across all primary and secondary-level codes of 0.71.

In conjunction with reading and re-reading the transcripts and weekly group discussions among the research team, the first, second, and third authors undertook a matrix analysis, sometimes referred to as a framework coding analysis (Spencer et al., 2003). This entailed reviewing all codes for

meaning and frequency with an eye towards differences between the two groups of teachers (those who received the White boy and those who received the Black boy). This approach enabled the authors to both engage in thematic analysis and case analysis to formulate a series of what are sometimes called, in the literature, "mini-theories" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These mini-theories and subsequent hypotheses were then "tested" by the authors by taking another close read of the coded portions of the transcripts. Negative evidence against the interim mini-theories was sought out and where found, resulted in changes to (or abandonment of) some. The summaries of these mini-theories within each section of the TPOT are presented in the qualitative results section below.

Researcher Positionality

The positionality of the authors is acknowledged. As a White cis female with an advanced degree in clinical psychology, the first author's research and clinical experiences working in under-resourced community settings influences her understanding of the best ways to support young children. The second author is a White cis female doctoral student in clinical psychology who studies the experiences of teachers and mental health professionals who work with youth in real-world settings. Her experiences with these communities have shaped her understanding of the critical role these adults play in children's well-being. The third author is a cis female of color with a bachelor's degree in psychology. Her lived experiences as a second-generation immigrant and an Afro-Caribbean/White biracial woman informs her research interests in creating equitable learning environments for racially and ethnically minority youth in urban settings. The last author is a White cis male professor of developmental psychology, who publishes laboratory, field, and intervention studies on how child development is influenced by implicit biases and stereotypes held by parents, teachers, and society at large.

Results

The qualitative analysis sought to identify themes that emerged from each of the two open-ended questions exploring potential differences between teachers who received the Black or White boy in their vignette. Each of these themes will be described in detail with illustrative quotations labeled with participant IDs (represented by a number, e.g. 142) and the race of the randomly assigned child in the vignette (Jake or DeShawn). Below we highlight themes from each TPOT section (primary-level code in bold heading) followed by the specific indicators (secondary-level code in italicized

and bold heading). Table 2 shows the frequency of transcripts for each code.

Supporting Children with Persistent Challenging Behavior

The TPOT section "Supporting children with persistent challenging behavior" is designed to increase our understanding about if and how teachers collect information about the child's behavior, and whether they use this knowledge to develop and implement a behavior plan.

Collecting Data About the Child's Behavior

The most frequent secondary-level code within this TPOT section was collecting data or information about the child's behavior. Collecting information ranged from simply wanting to document the behavior, "observe Jake closely and document all behaviors" (142/ Jake), to trying to better understand the behavior in order to devise an appropriate plan: "I would journal DeShawn's behavior, noting what happened before, during, and after the challenging times. I would also note when he is managing his behavior well, to look for patterns that could help with devising a strategy to support him" (24/DeShawn).

Many teachers also appeared more interested in understanding information about the child's behavior at home rather than in the classroom. For example, one teacher described that they would speak to the child's parents just to check whether they were noticing similar behaviors at home: "I would arrange a parent teacher conference. Just to get some feedback from the parents and what they are seeing Jake do at home" (85/Jake). Teachers listed a range of reasons why they would want to gather more information about the child's behavior at home, ranging from wanting to identify explanations for the behavior to wanting to place the blame of the behavior on the home or parents. For example, one teacher described how they hypothesize that something may be going on at home which is causing the child to act a certain way at school: "Are there any changes going on at home? New sibling, deaths, etc. These changes at home can be causing him stress and he does not know how to handle it, so he lashes out at other" (185/DeShawn). While explaining the process of data collection at home, some teachers' responses suggested that they may hold implicit biases. For instance, one teacher wanted to know what type of discipline Deshawn's parents used, potentially suggesting they are attributing the child's behavior to something at home: "I would find out about the family style/method of discipline" (120/DeShawn).

Despite the importance of understanding child behavior across home and school, very few teachers ($n=11$) described collecting information about the child's behavior at both home and school. Even fewer teachers referenced using a validated instrument (e.g., Ages and Stages Questionnaire; Squires & Brecker, 2009) or detailed log to

Table 2 Frequency of Codes derived from the TPOT[TM]

Codes	White boy (n)	Black boy (n)	Total (n)
1. Supporting Children with Persistent Challenging Behavior			
1.1 Collecting data	54	54	108
1.2 Development of behavior plan	30	29	59
1.3 Implementing behavior plan	12	8	20
1.4 Functional assessment/screening	2	2	4
2. Using Effective Strategies to Respond to Challenging Behavior			
2.1 Generic strategy	32	27	59
2.2 Tells child the expected behavior	10	7	17
2.3 Child reminded of posted behavior	0	1	1
2.4 Responds by teaching an acceptable alternative	8	7	15
2.5 States natural consequence and follow through	3	5	8
2.6 Assists child with problem solving	4	3	7
2.7 Provides positive attention	6	12	18
2.8 Provides descriptive praise	4	6	10
3. Red Flags			
3.1 Tells child what not to do	4	4	8
3.2 Reprimands child	3	2	5
3.3 Threatens child	1	0	1
3.4 Restrains or separates child	4	8	12
4. Involving Families in Supporting their Child's SEL & Addressing Challenging Behavior			
4.1 Information of importance of SEL	0	0	0
4.2 Community resources/referral to services	2	1	3

Note. TPOT™; Hemmeter et al., 2018

collect information. For example, as one teacher described, they would use a journal to promote the tracking across home and school:

> "I would keep a journal of his day-to-day behavior and share it with his parents as well as ask the parents to keep one and share it with me. Try to see if we can find a point where he lashes out more." (192/Jake).

Development of a Behavior Plan

Once information about the child's behavior is collected, the TPOT recommends that teachers create a behavior plan. In the current sample, approximately half of the teachers ($n = 51$) described developing a behavior plan. Most teachers described gathering family input during the development of the plan. However, the way of engaging families and the amount of family input vastly ranged. For instance, several teachers limited their conversations with families to identifying what strategies families use at home so that they could consider adding them into the behavior plan; "I will ask his parents have they seen this behavior at home and if so, what are some strategies used to help redirect his behavior" (63/Jake). Other teachers described more of a collaboration with parents. For instance, as this teacher described they would try to actively engage the parents in the co-creation of a plan:

> "I would inform them of his behavior and ask for strategies that they use at home to deal with him or ask if we could meet to come up with a plan to help him so can receive the best education possible." (66/Deshawn).

Some teachers mentioned the need to "sit down" with parents so that they could get "us both on the same page with how we can help him" (185/Deshawn). Others described how once a plan was developed it would be important to discuss with the parents a plan for implementation across home and school: "We would set up a plan for school and home and a shared notebook to go back and forth on how these techniques were working in both environments. And set up a follow up time to talk" (110/Jake).

Several teachers mentioned how it was important to make families feel valued during the development of the behavior plan: "I would make sure to include anything the family feels is necessary into the behavior plan in order to make sure that the family is included and knows that they are valuable in this process" (138/Jake). Strategies for partnering with families included finding ways to let parents "know you care enough to help with the problem rather than just talk about the behavior as a negative" (64/Jake) to explicitly telling parents that they "know their child best!" (187/Jake). The notion of wanting parents to know their value seemed to stem from the recognition that discussing child behavior concerns can be a delicate matter. As one teacher described, because emotions may run high there is a need for a teacher to consider the way they approach these conversations: "Using a calm and reassuring tone/volume, state the behaviors, ask for insight from the parents to best help the student from their perspective" (90/DeShawn).

Implementing Behavior Plan

Discussion of the implementation of the developed behavior plan was less common. Of the teachers that described implementation, most described a plan across home and school ($n = 14$), with only a few just at school ($n = 8$) and none just at home. The only example of implementing a behavior plan driven by the recommendations of the TPOT was as follows:

> "I would ask the parents if it would be okay to gather more data at school and to come up with a behavior plan. Then after a few weeks of collecting data and working on a behavior plan I would share that plan with his family and ask them if they would be willing to try these ideas at home as well (for example, if they would try having a calm corner and going through the steps of calming at home) so that Jake could have consistency at home and school. I would welcome their ideas and try to create a team atmosphere with his parents so that we could all do our best for Jake." (138/Jake).

Of the remaining teachers, only three specifically mentioned checking in on the behavior plan and adjusting as needed: "After implementing the strategies for a time period, I'll revisit them and see if new strategies are needed" (130/Jake).

Functional Assessment, Screening, or Measures

Only four teachers mentioned an assessment or screening of the child's behavior. Two of the teachers mentioned "beginning the evaluation process" (160/Jake), one stated they would "do a screening to see if he would benefit from some type of intervention" (140/Jake) and the other mentioned "try to get an assessment and opinion" from a professional (104/DeShawn).

Using Effective Strategies to Respond to Challenging Behavior

The TPOT primary-level section labeled as "Using effective strategies to respond to challenging behavior" describes specific strategies teachers can use in the classroom to support the child's behavioral skills. Below we highlight the most common themes.

Implements Developmentally Appropriate Generic Strategies

The most common strategy used in response to the child's behavior was described as a developmentally appropriate generic strategy. Developmentally appropriates strategies included things like "setting clear boundaries and sticking to them" (110/Jake), and "I would offer choices for toys for DeShawn to play with" (116/DeShawn). When describing a generic strategy, some teachers specifically linked the strategy to a behavior described in the vignette. For example, this teacher seemed specifically concerned about how Jake's behavior may cause classroom disruption: "When he disrupts during circle time, I will continue on with the group and not feed into or respond to his blurting out or being distracting" (17/Jake). However, as seen from this quote, although ignoring can be developmentally appropriate, this response may inadvertently place blame on the child as it leaves the impression that the misbehavior is the child's responsibility to manage. Additionally, ignoring the child's behavior risks overlooking other factors contributing to the misbehavior, therefore dismissing potential underlying needs or emotions.

When describing the use of a generic strategy, teachers tried to find an explanation or trigger for the child's behavior in order to pair it with the appropriate strategy. For example, one teacher thought that maybe Deshawn's behavior was a result of him having difficulty processing the information given to him: "I would be consistent with my expectations for D as well as give simple instructions in case he is overloaded with information" (124/DeShawn). Teachers often hypothesized that the child's behavior was a result of him wanting attention: "Whenever he does something that he is supposed to do I would make a big deal of it since clearly he is looking for attention" (173/DeShawn). For most teachers who believed the behavior was related to wanting attention, they described how they would ignore the behavior, as long as everyone was safe: "Since Jake's behaviors seem attention seeking I would ignore what I could, barring safety concerns" (119/Jake). Another teacher described how she would ignore Jake and help him problem solve so that in the future he has the skills to ask in the appropriate way: "When Jake is upset that he is not getting my whole attention at all

times we would work on how to ask for attention and what we can do when we are waiting for the teacher" (138/Jake). Of note, teachers were twice as likely to describe providing DeShawn with positive attention when behaving appropriately compared to Jake: "Whenever he does something that is supposed to do I would make a big deal of it since clearly he is looking for attention" (173/DeShawn).

Red Flags

The TPOT "red flags" section includes instances in which teachers' responses to the child behavior contraindicated appropriate steps to handling challenging behavior. The TPOT defines a "red flag" as signifying a problematic practice in need of immediate attention. After reviewing the themes that emerged under "tells the child what not to do" (3.1) and "reprimands" (3.2), the authors decided to combine these two sections because they were quite similar. We continued to separate threatening (3.3) and restraining/separating (3.4) because these actions seemed much harsher in nature.

Tells Child what not to do and 3.2 Reprimands the Child

Teachers' mentions of telling the child what to do as well as reprimanding the child often was described as pulling the child aside in order to speak to them one on one and tell them that their behavior is unacceptable: "I would speak to Jake on his level and tell him that he cannot act like that" (92/Jake). The severity of using this response varied. For example, one teacher coupled explaining how the behavior is not ok with comforting the child: "I would pull him aside and speak to him regarding his emotions and try to comfort him and then from there, explain that his behavior is not ok because it makes the other children sad" (137/Jake). Two teachers mentioned that while telling the child what not to do they would also let the child know the impact of their behavior on others: "I would explain to him that he can not take toys from other children and explain to him how that makes the other children feel" (194/Jake). One teacher referred to the use of vague discipline while reprimanding the child: "Despite his outburst and behavior I will calmly address it to him and proceed to discipline him according to his actions" (188/DeShawn).

Threatens the Child

Other teachers discussed threatening the child: "Explain to him why his actions are not correct and that if he continues to act that way there will be consequences that may lead to a parent conference" (165/DeShawn). Overall, these teachers seemed to imply that the child had control over their

behavior as well as the skills needed to change how they behaved. As one teacher described, they perceived that DeShawn knew what he was doing wrong and just needed prompting:

> "I would watch DeShawn and help him in sharing toys. During circle time, I would sit next to DeShawn and simply ask him, how would you feel if someone did those things to you when speaking? It's not nice to call others inappropriate names." (103/DeShawn).

This same teacher went on to describe how they would continue to point out how his behavior was wrong: "I would tell DeShawn that it's not nice to take away toys, when they are just trying to play with you. It's called sharing" (103/DeShawn).

Restrains or Separates Child

In some cases, teachers described the need to remove the child from the classroom with this occurring twice as often for DeShawn compared to Jake. As one teacher described they would remove the child as a way to keep others safe: "I would ask supervisors to remove him from the room when the behavior becomes a danger to myself or the children" (133/DeShawn). Other teachers discussed removal of Jake from the classroom in a more punitive nature: "I would put him in time out away from other children and not allow him to speak to anyone until he calms down" (190/Jake). As this teacher explains they felt that DeShawn needed to be kept out of the classroom until they could reflect on their own behavior:

> "When DeShawn acts inappropriately in class, I would pull him aside and have a serious conversation with him. I would have him sit aside until he calms down and have him reflect on his behavior. Once he is ready to be a part of the class again, he can return with other children." (72/Deshawn).

Another teacher described how they would not only remove DeShawn from the classroom, but they would also remove some of his privileges later that day:

> "I would have to have a one on one conversation with DeShawn in a very serious manner. Making eye contact letting him know his behavior is not acceptable. He would have 10 minutes of alone time to think about his actions. Perhaps take away any fun time that day." (67/Deshawn).

During some instances of removal, teachers described how they would remove the child from the classroom and immediately call the parents: "I would have the kids somewhere far away from Jake until I get ahold of his parents" (161/Jake). Whereas another teacher described how they wouldn't call the parents unless removal from the classroom didn't improve the behavior: "I would put to test time out, if that doesn't work, I would separate them from the kids and call his parents" (166/DeShawn).

In three instances removal of the child from the preschool setting was discussed, with both instances referring to the role of the parents. For example, one teacher stated: "If they [parents] did not engage in trying to resolve the situation I would then tell them that they would have to make other arrangements if we could not work something out" (25/Jake). Another teacher described how if the child's behavior (which they described as "obnoxious") didn't improve they would transition them to another program: "If those things don't work, prepare to transfer him to a program that will help identify any problems before coming of age and it getting worse" (164/Jake). The same teacher went on to describe how the parents are probably to blame for the behavior:

> "In my experience most parents don't get a lot of time with their little ones during the week. So when they do, they spoil them no matter how the child's behavior was while apart. Most are naive and will turn around and blame the educators first and think that they play no part at all." (164/Jake).

This teacher went on to describe how they would meet with the parents and explain that if the behavior does not improve, the child would be expelled: "After that I would explain that if behavior does continue we will have to place the child out of the program" (164/Jake). Importantly, in all three instances where removal of the child was mentioned, teachers utilized threatening language, emphasizing that unless the child's behavior improved they would be removed from the school.

Involving Families in Supporting Their Child's Social Emotional Development and Addressing Behavior

The TPOT "involving families" section includes any specific instances in which teachers sought to include families in addressing the child's behavior. In the current study, no teachers described providing information about the importance of social-emotional learning (4.1) and only three mentioned providing information about resources in the community (4.2). Among these, two teachers reported they would offer resources to the families, but their answers

were vague: "I would offer to email them some resources if indicated and I would be sure to follow-up on that" (24/ DeShawn). In contrast, only one teacher mentioned specific and actionable resources, stating they would "see if they would consider getting an evaluation for therapy services like OT or talk to a social worker" (182/Jake).

Discussion

Using an experimental design with a controlled vignette, we used qualitative methods to investigate how preschool teachers described responding to challenging classroom behavior and involving families in the process. Findings suggest that preschool teachers use a range of approaches to handling the child behavior, some appropriate and others maladaptive (according to a widely used and validated MTSS). Importantly, preschool teachers referenced involving families as a separate step or process than how they would address the child behavior in the classroom and frequently placed the blame on families for the child's behavior. Finally, there were qualitative differences observed based on the child's race, particularly concerning positive attention and red flags, though to a small degree. Specific findings and implications are discussed below with a focus on helping the preschool field move towards educational equity.

Family Matters

In line with TPOT recommendations, most (82.44%) teachers described tracking the child behavior as their first, and at times only, step for responding (e.g., when/why it was occurring). In our sample and previous research (Crosnoe, 2020; McGuire & Meaden, 2024), some teachers described gathering information from families to attribute the child's behavior to the parents or home life, operating under the belief that the child's behavior was a result of something outside the classroom. These findings are concerning, because previous research indicates that once teachers begin to place the cause of the behavior outside of the classroom, their feelings of hopelessness to change the child's behavior increases and expulsion becomes more likely (Martin et al., 2018; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Ultimately, these findings suggest a possible hindrance in the development of a collaborative partnership that is known to support child outcomes (Sheridan et al., 2019).

Our current findings suggest a continued necessity to support preschool educators when they are collecting information about children's behavior to help them better understand the function of the behavior, rather than resorting to blaming the child and/or families. Training in family centeredness practices can also support teachers in learning from families to better understand each child's unique needs (Bierman et al., 2023; Lloyd et al., 2021). Preschool teachers may benefit from practical advice and training about how to be meaningful in engaging families, including helping teachers understand the perspectives of parents and preparing teachers for their meetings with parents (Kalla & Broockman, 2020). Practical guidance for teachers may aid in fostering meaningful family engagement around children's behavior to meet their needs.

Preschool Teachers Need Support when Faced with Challenging Behavior

Aligned with previous research (Buysse et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2009), preschool teachers (45.38%) tended to rely on low-burden, generic strategies, often referred to as Tier 1 (universal instruction to all children) or 2 (small group instruction) strategies, to address persistent behavior concerns instead of an individualized intervention (Tier 3). However, this reliance on generic strategies raises concerns, as failing to implement Tier 3 interventions may increase the likelihood that children with challenging behavior are removed from the classroom for not adhering to Tier 1 or Tier 2 guidance from teachers. Such removal of preschoolers from their classroom or setting is harmful for their development and leaves children (and their families) without access to the education and intervention supports they deserve (Children's Defense Fund, 2013; Edelman, 2007).

Despite an increase in MTSSs in preschool, their implementation has faced several challenges (see Shepley & Grisham-Brown, 2019). Future studies could seek to better understand the rationale behind teacher's implementation of various strategies and their plans for providing more intensive support if their approaches prove to be insufficient. However, the current findings, and those of others, underscore the need to support preschool teachers' in using more intensive strategies, or knowing how to access them when faced with challenging behavior.

Detrimental Practices in Response to Behavior

Our findings reveal that despite an increasing awareness regarding the high rates of preschool expulsions over the past decade (Zinsser et al., 2022), a sizable number of preschool teachers continue to resort to punitive and disciplinary measures when responding to children's challenging behavior. In the current study, reading about a child in the form of a written vignette with a picture on a computer provoked teachers to feel that this fictional child's behavior warranted punishment, with some teachers continuing to suggest the removal of the child from the classroom or preschool program entirely. Because real classrooms are

much more chaotic, busy, and stressful (De Los Santos et al., 2023), teachers may be even more likely to resort to punitive and disciplinary practices during the VDPs of addressing challenging behavior in the classroom. Thus, the results of the present study emphasize the need for further research exploring effective, real-time interventions and support systems to assist teachers in responding to challenging behavior.

Emergent Racial Themes

There are marked disparities in how Black children are perceived and treated in preschool (Meltzoff & Gilliam, 2024; Zulauf-McCurdy et al., 2024) including being twice as likely as White children to be expelled (Fabes et al., 2021; Meek et al., 2020). In the current study, we found that preschool teachers were twice as likely to recommend restraining or separating DeShawn, the Black child. Notably, we also found that teachers were twice as likely to provide positive attention to the Black child compared to the White child, which may be related to teachers misattributing the child's behavior to a desire for attention. Research suggests that preschool teachers are more likely to pathologize Black children's behavior, placing the cause of the behavior on the child or their family, rather than keeping the focus on the behavior itself (Martin et al., 2018). This results in teachers having low and unfair expectations as well as more harsh interactions with young Black children (e.g., Gilliam et al., 2016; Malik, 2017). Together, preschool educators' misattribution of child behavior and their maladaptive response sets off a devastating cascade of events that can contribute to the "cradle to prison pipeline" or the cumulative impact of multiple factors that disproportionately diverts Black children toward incarceration (Children's Defense Fund, 2013; Edelman, 2007). Interventions are needed to address implicit biases and promote equitable practices among early educators when responding to challenging behavior (Meltzoff & Gilliam, 2024).

Implications for Research and Practice

Despite an increase in anti-racist curriculum/training (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2013) and an emphasis on family engagement (e.g., Abenavoli et al., 2021; Steen, 2022), preschool teachers continue to struggle to implement changes into everyday practice (Escayg, 2020). One practical implication relates to supporting teachers in finding ways to better understand the underlying need or function of both child and family behavior, and to implement this understanding during critical decision points. Researchers and practitioners can support teachers by evaluating current measures and practices and being intentional

in integrating steps related to understanding child behavior and integrating family engagement. As practice recommendations currently stand, family engagement is often separate (or absent) from recommended classroom-based practices. For example, within the TPOT, family engagement is a standalone section and is not integrated throughout each section (e.g., strategies to respond to behavior or supporting children with persistent challenging behavior). A critical step forward may involve assessing and enhancing practice guidelines by integrating family engagement throughout all aspects of decision making rather than conceptualizing it as a separate entity.

In regard to supporting Black children and their families, our findings point to the need for researchers to be intentional in looking at the effect of race when understanding teacher decision-making and behavior. A first step is realizing that many of our current measures and tools for evaluation don't account for underlying factors that may cause racial disproportionality in outcomes. For example, the TPOT and other MTSSs do not include specific references related to racial diversity, equity, or inclusion (see Fallon et al., 2023). Without drawing attention to issues of diversity, these practices may be helping teachers in other areas but inadvertently allowing disparities to continue in how classroom teachers respond to child behavior as a function of race. The utilization of more innovative tools and methods, such as observations in live classrooms, may better capture and understand differences in how teachers respond to children's disruptive behavior and engage with families and how this interacts with race and other factors. Additionally, developing new tools and measures specifically designed to assess implicit racial biases and disparities in teachers' decision making around behavior and family engagement may promote greater equity in these education settings.

Lastly, moving towards educational equity we encourage those in the early childhood field to reimagine the lens in which we evaluate children and families as it is influenced by a narrative based on White definitions of what "appropriate" behaviors and practices are, therefore constructing an image of child behavior and parent engagement that reifies Whiteness as the standard (Lee & Nasir, 2023). This may result in preschool settings undervaluing and overlooking the strengths and assets of Black children and families (Iruka et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2023). In line with a 2022 address by the American Educational Research Association (Nasir, 2022) we encourage the early childhood field to consider how we can move away of our traditional way of providing early care and education and think about how we can support all children and families in ways that honor their history, needs, and elevate their lived experiences (Lloyd et al., 2021).

Limitations

Despite strengths, including a random assignment experiment, this study is not without limitations. Teachers were not required to discuss multiple steps they would take to address the behavior, and we were not able to assess the intentionality or deeper reasons for the teachers' responses. Another limitation is that we did not assess teacher knowledge of and access to best MTTSs or other evidence-based practice recommendations– specifically, teachers were not asked whether they had prior experience with any SEL curriculum nor the TPOT, which may have influenced their responses to the questions. Lastly, we only found minor differences as a function of race of the child which may be attributed to heightened awareness of racial disparities in school discipline and teachers completing the study on a computer, therefore not evoking the same feelings they would encounter during a live VDP. Future research is needed to examine how results may differ if teachers were observed directly in the classroom and if teacher race influences findings.

Conclusion

A considerable issue in preschool is that educators are faced with challenging child behavior daily, requiring them to make in-the-moment decisions regarding the appropriate response. Despite an increase in recommended practices and MTSSs, our study suggests that preschool teachers may have difficulty implementing them in response to child behavior. Teachers' response to challenging child behavior in preschool settings is critical for supporting young children's social-emotional development and future success. Maladaptive responses can set off a cascade of negative events for young children and their families, possibly exacerbating existing inequities (Children's Defense Fund, 2013; Edelman, 2007). Thus, finding ways to support preschool teachers in successfully implementing full tiered systems of support and finding meaningful ways to engage families in the process is critical. Developing and targeting interventions during this vulnerable period– children's first encounters with the education system– may be a first step towards inclusive and equitable early childhood education for all.

Declarations

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