



Does the presence of a classmate with emotional/behavioral disabilities link to other students' absences in kindergarten?

Michael A. Gottfried^{a,*}, Anna Egalite^b, J. Jacob Kirksey^a

^a Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

^b College of Education, North Carolina State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, there has been a policy push for including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Little is known, however, on the effects that this classroom compositional change may have on other students. This study focuses on the increased presence of classmates with emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBDs), as these children often exhibit behavioral disruptions. Given that classroom disruptions are associated with decreased school engagement, we tested for an association between the presence of classmates with EBDs and other students' absences. Using a national dataset and relying on within-school variation in classrooms that do and do not have a classmate with an EBD as well as a rich set of control variables, we found that annual student absences increased when students had a classmate with an EBD. Further, the likelihood of being chronically absent was higher when students had a classmate with an EBD. Importantly, we examined what malleable factors might support inclusion for more successful classroom environments. We found an array of teacher and classroom characteristics that could create more supportive classrooms for all children. Implications for how compositional changes to inclusive classroom contexts might address all children's needs are discussed.

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees students with disabilities a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), ensuring access to the curriculum, grade-level standards, and social environment of the general education classroom. Consequently, more students with disabilities are being included in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In 1989, only 32% of public school students receiving special education services under IDEA spent the majority of their school day (over 80% of total instructional time) in a general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). By 2011, that figure jumped to 61% (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Given these compositional changes, many educational stakeholders have raised issue with whether the needs of all children can be adequately addressed in the context of an increasingly diverse classroom setting (Moon, Todd, Morton, & Ivey, 2012; Rule, Stefanich, Haselhuhn, & Peiffer, 2009; Supalo, Mallouk, Rankel, Amorosi, & Graybill, 2008). For instance, concerns have been raised that these compositional changes may affect the equitable distribution of classroom resources, such as instructional quality, as

teachers have to devote more time to address many more types of needs (Moon et al., 2012). Thus as schools learn to balance a variety of student needs with existing resources, the issue of maintaining a high quality education for students with and without disabilities has become increasingly poignant (De Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005; Hayworth, 2009; Supalo et al., 2008; Wiley & Wright, 2004).

When considering these issues, students with 'emotional disturbances,' as referred to in IDEA or more appropriately referred to in recent literature as students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBDs), are of particular importance. This IDEA disability group is identified starting in early childhood (Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). It is hypothesized that the development of EBDs in early childhood occurs because the first five years of children's lives are particularly malleable to socio-emotional and behavioral development, so children in early childhood are especially vulnerable to negative experiences that might bring about EBDs (Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Skuban, & Horwitz, 2001; Egger & Angold, 2006). Of all early childhood years, the prevalence of EBDs is highest in kindergarten (Cooper, Masi, & Vick, 2009; Lavigne et al., 1996).

Typically for kindergarten-aged children, a diagnosis of EBD is characterized by symptoms of externalizing behavioral problems (Brauner & Stephens, 2006; Reschly, 1996), which include aggression, bullying, hyperactivity, poor control of emotions, and disruption of activities (Abrams, 2005; Meadow & Trybus, 1985).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mgottfried@education.ucsb.edu (M.A. Gottfried), annaegalite@gmail.com (A. Egalite), jjkirksey@uemail.ucsb.edu (J.J. Kirksey).

Though an external psychiatrist can make a diagnosis of an EBD, federal policy requires an individualized education plan (IEP) team at the school level to make its own diagnosis (Bakken, Obiakor, & Rotatori, 2012). IEP teams typically consist of school psychologists, general education teachers, paraprofessionals and/or parents of the students; this ensures that the diagnosis is unbiased and in the best interest of the student (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). It is important to note that federal definitions under IDEA require that an EBD diagnosis remain separate from other disability diagnoses; thus, specific disabilities that affect students' emotional/behavioral development, such as autism, are separate from the EBD classification.

Approximately 105% more students with EBDs were placed in general education classrooms in 2007 compared to 1990 (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). Given the increased presence of children with EBDs in general classrooms, one focal point of concern that has been raised is that children with EBDs are the most likely of the 13 IDEA disability classifications to cause classroom disruptions or exhibit behavioral problems in school (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Maloney & Shenker, 1995). Therefore, many stakeholders have noted that the presence of students with EBDs might add a layer of complexity in trying to create supportive classroom environments in light of IDEA and FAPE (Evers, 2010; Sheet, 2010). Many of these concerns are grounded in claims that disruptive behaviors might negatively influence other classmates' attitudes, performance, and engagement in school (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003).

1. Background and this study

Though there is an increased spotlight on whether these inclusive practices do or do not support early schooling outcomes for all classmates, little empirical work serves to support or refute the claims on either side of the debate. Fletcher (2009, 2010) used nationally representative data and found that having a classmate with an EBD led to lower reading and math scores for other students in the classroom, especially in low-income schools. Gottfried and Harven (2015) also found that students who had classmates with EBDs tended to have lower math and reading test scores, though these effects were attenuated by classroom gender composition. Even less research has focused on non-achievement outcomes. Gottfried (2014a) found that students in classrooms with more peers with disabilities exhibited higher frequencies of behavioral problems and lower frequencies of social skills. The effects on these outcomes were larger when students had classmates with EBDs, though the effects were moderated by the characteristics of other peers in the classroom (e.g., ability) as well as teacher qualifications (e.g., years of experience).

It should be noted that a broader – but still fairly small – set of studies have focused on the role of peer behavior, but not necessarily on classmates with EBDs. Though this is not an exact mapping onto our study of classmates with EBDs, it does contribute to a richer understanding of the potential spillover effects of classmates' behavior. Figlio (2007) used a longitudinal, urban district-level dataset from Florida to examine the effect of classroom disruption on peer performance. By using boys' given names often associated with girls as a proxy for students with behavioral issues, he found that having classmates with behavioral issues was associated with reduced test scores as well as overall disciplinary problems for others in the classroom. Using the ECLS-K:1999 dataset, Aizer (2008) found that having classmates with attention deficit disorders, often a disorder grouped within the EBD classification (Egger & Angold, 2006), was negatively associated with male classmates' reading achievement. Carrell and Hoekstra (2010) found that in classrooms where classmates had witnessed domestic violence

(who were assumed to be more disruptive due to experiencing trauma), other students had lower achievement outcomes as well as greater instances of misbehavior. Both Kristoffersen (2013) and Krægpøth, Nielsen, and Simonsen (2014) expanded on this study to also include classmates with divorced parents, with one or more deceased parents, with parents in prison, or with a diagnosed mental disability. Both studies concluded that the presence of these children negatively correlated with achievement for other classmates.

Our present study contributes to this limited body of literature by examining if there was an association between having classmates with EBDs and other students' absences. Examining absences was critical for two key reasons. First, many have raised that behavioral disruptions of any sort will create a less engaging educational environment for other students in the same classroom (Henry & Rickman, 2007; Lazear, 2001; West & Sloane, 1986). It has been well-established that school absences serve as a key indicator of educational disengagement (Bealing, 1990; Gottfried, 2014b; Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews, & Kienhuis, 2010; Harte, 1995; Reid, 1983; Southworth, 1992). Therefore, while there has been an expressed policy dialogue around how classmates with EBDs might increase disengagement among others through behavioral disruptions, empirical research has yet to examine one of the key metrics associated with disengagement.

Second, aside from this particular under-explored link, school absences generally are critical yet understudied. High rates of absences negatively correlate with academic achievement, grade promotion, and high school completion (Dreyfoos, 1990; Finn, 1993; Lehr & McComas, 2005; Steward, Steward, Blair, Jo, & Hill, 2008) as well as with increased antisocial and behavioral issues (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Finn, 1989; Gottfried, 2014b; Newmann, 1981). These issues are particularly critical for children in kindergarten; out of all years of elementary school, absenteeism is highest in kindergarten (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). As kindergarten is an extremely formative year of schooling that sets the trajectory for future academic and developmental success (Duncan et al., 2007; Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005; Posner & Rothbart, 2000), missing in-school time during this year raises significant concerns for the success of our nation's youngest students. For instance, kindergartners with greater absences have lower short- and long-term academic and developmental outcomes, including lower test scores, higher chances of grade retention, and lower frequencies of social interactions (Chang & Romero, 2008; Connolly & Olson, 2012).

Given the concerns about absenteeism in kindergarten as well as the increased dialogue surrounding the inclusion of students with EBDs in general education classrooms, we asked the following two research questions:

1. Does the presence of a classmate with an EBD predict differences in absence outcomes for other students in the classroom?
2. Do these associations differ based on individual- or classroom-level contextual characteristics?

1.1. Framework

To inform these research questions, the present study has developed a conceptual framing drawn from prior research on the peer effects of the inclusion of students with disabilities or the peer effects of students with disruptive behavior on achievement and socio-behavioral outcomes. To date, no study has examined the effects of classmates with EBDs on others' absenteeism, so the direction of this particular effect remains speculative though grounded in the literature.

First, the inclusion of students with EBDs could produce positive direct effects on peers. For instance, other students may develop

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