



Impact of performance feedback delivered via electronic mail on preschool teachers' use of descriptive praise

Mary Louise Hemmeter^{a,*}, Patricia Snyder^b, Kiersten Kinder^c, Kathleen Artman^c

^a Department of Special Education, Box 228 GPC, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37203, United States

^b University of Florida, United States

^c Vanderbilt University, United States

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ABSTRACT

We examined the effects of a professional development intervention that included data-based performance feedback delivered via electronic mail (e-mail) on preschool teachers' use of descriptive praise and whether increased use of descriptive praise was associated with changes in classroom-wide measures of child engagement and challenging behavior. A multiple probe single-subject experimental design across four preschool teachers was used. Following a brief training session on the use of descriptive praise, coaches observed each teacher conduct a large-group activity and sent them e-mail messages containing performance feedback with a hyperlink to a descriptive praise video exemplar. Training plus e-mail feedback was associated with increases in teachers' use of descriptive praise for each of the four teachers. Challenging behavior decreased somewhat as teachers' use of descriptive praise increased. Class-wide measures of children's engagement remained relatively stable across baseline and intervention phases. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

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Concerns have been raised about the numbers of children enrolled in early childhood programs who exhibit challenging behaviors (McCabe & Frede, 2007). For children under age 6, prevalence estimates for significant problem behavior range from 10% to 25% of the population (Campbell, 1995; Kupersmidt, Bryant, & Willoughby, 2000; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). A recent study found that preschool children are more likely to be expelled from their early childhood program because of challenging behavior than are school-age children (Gilliam, 2005). Several studies have documented that young children who demonstrate persistent challenging behaviors during the preschool years continue to have problems with both socialization and academic outcomes during the elementary school years and beyond (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Dunlap et al., 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Early childhood teachers and caregivers have identified a significant need for professional development to help them address young children's challenging behavior (Hemmeter, Corso, & Cheatham, 2006; Joseph & Strain, 2008). Moreover, early childhood practitioners reported that having children with challenging behavior in their classrooms negatively impacts their job satisfaction (Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996). Based on these data obtained from teachers and the reported numbers of children who exhibit per-

sistent challenging behavior in preschool classrooms, a need exists to identify promising professional developmental approaches that support teachers to implement with fidelity evidence-based and socially relevant strategies to address challenging behavior and promote positive social behavior.

A growing research base exists that describes characteristics of effective early childhood professional development. Based on this research, current guidelines recommend professional development should be implemented over time, grounded in teacher practice, linked to outcomes, collaborative with the teacher, and interactive (NSDC, 2001; USDE, 2007). Despite these guidelines, one-shot workshops remain a common approach to professional development both in education and in early childhood education (Guskey, 2003; Winton & McCollum, 2008). The usefulness of workshops alone for changing early childhood teachers' practices or supporting the implementation of new practices in applied contexts has been questioned (Snyder & Wolfe, 2008; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). Nevertheless, Sexton et al. (1996) found that the most frequent forms of in-service training reported by early childhood practitioners were lectures, provision of handouts, and demonstrations during workshops.

Even when professional development reflects the characteristics described above, it typically does not result in changes in teacher's behavior or fidelity of implementation of evidence-based practices in the classroom if the professional development does not include instructional strategies that are anchored in the specific classroom context in which the teacher is working (McGee,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 615 322 5648; fax: +1 615 343 1570.
E-mail address: ml.hemmeter@vanderbilt.edu (M.L. Hemmeter).

2008; Pianta, 2006; Snyder & Wolfe, 2008). One promising strategy that can be anchored in the classroom context is performance feedback (Crow & Snyder, 1998; Noell et al., 2005). Performance feedback involves providing the teacher with feedback using data from observations of that teacher in the context of her classroom. As more teachers have gained access to technology, the Internet has become a delivery mode for professional development (e.g., Kinzie et al., 2006; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008; Whitaker, Kinzie, Kraft-Sayre, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2007) and a mechanism through which performance feedback might be efficiently and effectively delivered.

Several studies conducted in early childhood contexts have used performance feedback as part of a professional development intervention designed to change teachers' behavior or to support their implementation of evidence-based practices (e.g., Casey & McWilliam, 2008; Cotnoir-Bichelman, Thompson, McKerchar, & Haremza, 2006; Kaiser, Ostrosky, & Alpert, 1993; Mudd & Wolery, 1987; Schepis, Reid, Ownbey, & Parsons, 2001; Venn & Wolery, 1992). Each study included performance feedback as a key component of an intervention designed to support caregivers' or educators' use of evidence-based practices that, in turn, would promote children's interaction, language, or pre-academic skills. None of these studies, however, focused specifically on the use of performance feedback as part of a professional development intervention designed to teach early childhood practitioners strategies for preventing challenging behavior and promoting positive behavior.

Recent efforts to address young children's challenging behavior have emphasized comprehensive approaches to behavior support (Fox, Carta, Dunlap, Strain, & Hemmeter, 2010; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Fox & Hemmeter, 2009; Hemmeter, Fox, Jack, & Broyles, 2007; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006; Stormont, Covington, & Lewis, 2006; Stormont, Lewis, & Beckner, 2005). These approaches include a focus on the instruction of specific social skills and behavior expectations in the context of well-designed environments and responsive teacher-child interactions. A key component of teaching social skills and behavior expectations involves adults or peers providing children with positive descriptive feedback (i.e., descriptive praise) about their use of targeted social behaviors. Descriptive praise refers to adults or peers providing children with feedback that describes, using positive terms, the behavior expectation observed, and it can involve providing information about the effect of the behavior on the environment (e.g., "It made Jayden so happy when you asked her to play with you.", "I can tell my friends are ready for group time because they are sitting on their [name] squares."). As part of comprehensive behavior support approaches, descriptive praise is designed to be a proactive or preventive strategy that helps children understand which behaviors are appropriate or desired in the preschool classroom. When descriptive praise is used in this way, it is consistent with recommended practices described by two major professional organizations, the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Early Childhood (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009). In addition, early childhood educators have endorsed descriptive praise as an important behavior support strategy and have indicated it is feasible to implement (Stormont, Lewis, & Covington-Smith, 2005).

The use of descriptive praise has been associated with positive outcomes for elementary-age children. Descriptive praise has been demonstrated to increase on-task behavior, engagement, and academic performance of elementary students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Stormont, 2002; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). In the early childhood literature, most research has examined descriptive praise as part of a comprehensive, multi-component behavior support intervention (e.g., Connell, Carta, Lutz, Randall, & Wilson, 1993; Hiralall

& Martens, 1998; Slider, Noell, & Williams, 2006), making it difficult to isolate the effects of descriptive praise from other components of the intervention, particularly in relation to decreases in children's challenging behavior or increases in child engagement or time on task.

Three recent studies have examined relationships between implementation of a professional development intervention focused on teaching early childhood educators to use descriptive praise and teachers' use of descriptive praise during various classroom activities (Barton & Wolery, 2007; Fullerton, Conroy, & Correa, 2009; Stormont, Smith, & Lewis, 2007). Each of the professional development interventions included a performance feedback component. Moreover, two studies examined relationships between teachers' use of descriptive praise and children's challenging behavior.

Stormont et al. (2007) investigated relationships between three Head Start teachers' use of pre-corrections and descriptive praise and children's problem behavior. Pre-corrections are statements by the teacher that tell the child what the expected behaviors are for an upcoming activity, transition, or task. The goal is to provide information to the child about what the expected behaviors are to prevent the child from engaging in challenging behavior. Participating teachers were low implementers of targeted behavior support strategies, even after they participated in a program-wide professional development inservice on a comprehensive positive behavior support approach. As part of their study-specific professional development, each teacher participated in an individual 30-min meeting in which information about how to implement pre-correction and descriptive praise during small-group activities was presented. Teachers practiced pre-corrective statements in the context of the meeting and they received corrective feedback by researchers until they successfully generated two pre-corrective statements. During the intervention phase of the study, at the conclusion of each observation session, feedback was provided to the teachers about their use of pre-correction and descriptive praise. According to the authors, this feedback was delivered in 1 min or less to each teacher. Results showed teachers' rate of pre-corrections and descriptive praise increased over baseline levels and children's rate of challenging behavior during teacher-directed, small-group activities decreased from levels observed during baseline. Because this study combined pre-corrections and praise statements, it was not possible to evaluate the effects of descriptive praise statements on children's challenging behavior in isolation. In addition, feedback was delivered to teachers immediately following an observation session by the researchers and lasted only 1 min. This study did not include measures of generalization or maintenance of the teachers' use of the strategies.

Fullerton et al. (2009) extended the work of Stormont et al. (2007) by studying the effects of training and performance feedback on teachers' use of descriptive praise during transitions in preschool classrooms. These researchers examined relationships between four teachers' use of descriptive praise statements and four target children's challenging behavior, acknowledging the need to isolate the effects of teachers' use of descriptive praise on young children's challenging behavior. A transition activity identified by each teacher as a time when the target child's behavior was most challenging was the context in which descriptive praise was used. A second transition activity was used to evaluate whether teachers generalized their use of descriptive praise with the target child.

The professional development in the Fullerton et al. (2009) study consisted of each teacher participating in an individual training session with a researcher that lasted between 1 h to 1 h 45 min. Training sessions included a definition of appropriate and challenging behavior demonstrated by the target child, an explanation of how to use specific praise statements to increase appropri-

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