

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONSCIOUS DISCIPLINE

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Classroom management is a significant challenge for school teachers and administrators, often rated as the primary area of concern for first-year teachers and the most common reason many choose to leave the profession. Recently there has been an increased interest in social and emotional learning and its' relationship to improved student behavior, academic outcomes, and emotional health, particularly during the early childhood years. This study examined the social validity of *Conscious Discipline*, a classroom management program which incorporates social and emotional learning. Seventeen early childhood special educators rated the significance, appropriateness, and effects of the program in a preschool setting. Results indicated that the program had high social validity, with ratings positively correlated with both teaching experience and experience using the program. Limitations and implications of this study are discussed.

Classroom management is a significant challenge for school teachers and administrators, often rated as the primary area of concern for first-year teachers (Çakmak, 2008; Hertzog, 2002; Martin, Chiodo, & Chang, 2001; Meister & Melnick, 2003) and the most common reason many choose to leave the profession (Liu & Meyer, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001). One explanation for the classroom management difficulties teachers experience may be insufficient training during pre-service teacher education. McCann and colleagues (2005) surveyed 111 universities and found that only 30% of teacher education programs offered courses specifically addressing classroom management.

Many traditional classroom management approaches are based on behavioral theories and systems of rewards and punishments (Brophy, 1999; Erwin, 2004), emphasizing operant conditioning techniques (Brophy, 2004). McCaslin and

Good (1992) noted that such approaches have been widely used in schools; however, chronic classroom behavioral problems have increased (Lohrmann & Talerico, 2004). Some have noted that although curricula have changed significantly, behavior management approaches generally have not—creating a potential discrepancy between “a curriculum that urges problem solving and critical thinking and a management system that requires compliance and narrow obedience” (McCaslin & Good, 1992, p.12).

Researchers and educators have promoted alternatives and supplements to traditional classroom management approaches (Bailey, 2000; Brophy, 1999; Dollard & Christensen, 1996; Smart, 2010), many of which incorporate the use of social and emotional learning. However, Martin (2004) pointed out the need for more research on many of these alternative approaches. Research offering direction

and understanding in effective classroom management training for teachers would have important implications for teacher retention (Ritter & Hancock, 2007; Smart, 2010; Stoughton, 2007) and student learning, since classroom environments play such a fundamental role in children's learning (Stronge, Ward, Tucker, & Hindman, 2007; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

#### *Social and Emotional Learning*

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which children learn to recognize emotions in themselves and others, manage their own emotions, develop empathy, make good decisions, establish constructive friendships, and handle challenges successfully (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003). SEL curricula are designed to help children develop skills in emotional regulation and become more empathetic toward peers and adults (Payton et al., 2008). Through SEL curricula children can also learn appropriate ways to engage socially, thereby making and keeping friends.

Implementation of SEL programs has resulted in significant improvements in school environments, student learning, and academic performance, as well as reductions in negative behaviors (CASEL, 2007; Kramer, Caldarella, Christensen, & Shatzer, 2010; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). SEL programs promote positive behaviors such as kindness and caring, while discouraging problem behaviors such as bullying and violence (CASEL, 2007; Whitcomb, 2009). As young children learn to use effective emo-

tional regulation skills to meet their social and emotional needs in a safe environment, they can focus more on what is happening in the classroom, thereby increasing their chances for academic successes and decreasing their chances of experiencing behavioral problems (CASEL, 2010).

It is appropriate for preschool educators to directly teach socially appropriate behaviors using SEL. Emotional and behavioral problems can occur frequently during preschool, as young children are just beginning to develop language as well as capacities to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Egger & Angold, 2006). Changes in the structure of families and conditions of society are also leaving children at greater risk for developing social and emotional problems (Doll & Lyon, 1998; Greenberg et al., 2003). Some of these changes include larger percentages of children living in poverty, lack of support from either parent, changes in family composition, and decline of traditional societal values (Harland, Rijnveld, Brugman, Verloove-Vanhorick, & Verhulst, 2002; Huaqing Qi & Kaiser, 2003). Children with poor emotional communication have difficulties connecting with their teachers and classmates, have tendencies to experience internalizing behavior problems (i.e., depression, anxiety, withdrawal), and often use physical aggression to convey their needs (Denham & Weissberg, 2004; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Such problematic social behaviors demand the attention of early educators and warrant adult guidance and intervention (Della-Mattera, 2011).

The preschool environment should be enriching and conducive to positive behavior and appropriate emotions: SEL programs have been developed that foster such environments. In such programs children can learn to care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, avoid negative behaviors, and develop positive relationships (Zins et al., 2004). In addition to directly teaching such skills, fostering emotional stability and feelings of security are also significant aspects of SEL. These programs often use three foundational socialization techniques to promote SEL in young children: directly teaching social and emotional skills, modeling of these skills by adults, and displaying helpful reactions to children's difficult emotions and behaviors when they occur (Denham & Weissberg, 2004).

Young children need to form positive attachments with adults they can trust, such as caring teachers, thus developing feelings of safety in their surroundings and a better sense of self-worth (Hyson, 2004). Preschool teachers can discuss, model, and practice with their students as they teach them about feelings, thoughts, and behaviors: Explicit teaching should be used with specific explanations and examples (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). Teachers must model positive expressions and control of emotions when things are going well in class, but especially when things are not. Teachers must also set examples in their classrooms as they teach their students to handle uncomfortable situations or mistakes by discussing and clarifying their own emotions and behaviors while working through a difficult situation. One

program that seeks to incorporate the elements of SEL while improving teachers' classroom management is *Conscious Discipline*.

#### *Conscious Discipline*

*Conscious Discipline* (Bailey, 2000) is a classroom management program which incorporates social and emotional learning based on research and practices in child development, neuropsychology, and character education. The program differs from the traditional classroom management approaches in both its core assumptions and applications. According to Bailey (2000), traditional classroom management is often based on the following assumptions: (a) It is possible to make other people change, (b) the use of external rewards and punishments is foundational to behavior management, and (c) conflict is bad and should be avoided. However, the assumptions behind *Conscious Discipline* are that (a) It is impossible to make other people change—people can only change themselves, (b) relationships are foundational to behavioral management and give people the willingness to solve problems, and (c) conflict is a necessary part of learning and an opportunity for teaching and building relationships.

The first step of *Conscious Discipline* is training teachers in the “seven basic powers for self-control” (perception, unity, attention, free will, love, acceptance, and intention) as well as the “seven basic skills for discipline” (composure, encouragement, assertiveness, choices, positive intent, empathy, and consequences). These powers and skills are designed to help indi-

viduals become more conscious of their inner state, manage their emotions in a healthy and appropriate way, and learn to be proactive—instead of reactive—during difficult situations. Only after teachers have been successful in using these powers and skills in their own lives are they able to effectively teach students to use them in the classroom. Teachers who master these skills will also know how to transform moments of conflict into teaching opportunities for themselves and for their students.

A crucial component of *Conscious Discipline* is a positive relational climate called the “school family.” As students and teachers engage in helpful acts, fulfill responsibilities, creatively solve problems, resolve conflict, and demonstrate care for others, the school family is enhanced so it can provide a sense of belonging, interdependence, and safety (Bailey, 2000). The positive relationships within the school family become the fundamental motivation for students to choose appropriate classroom behaviors.

#### *Research on Conscious Discipline*

A review of the literature located two published studies on *Conscious Discipline*: One addressed the effects of the program on student behavior, and the other addressed the effects on school climate. In the first study, Hoffman, Hutchinson, and Reiss (2005) reported that *Conscious Discipline* positively influenced the lives of 10 elementary school students. Teachers completed pre-test and post-test ratings using the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC; Reynolds & Kamphaus,

1992). Results indicated that the majority of these students improved on the BASC Externalizing Problems, Internalizing Problems, and Adaptive subscales, as well as the Behavioral Systems Index. It should be noted that while improvements were demonstrated, this was a small study with a very limited number of participants.

In the second study, Hoffman, Hutchinson, and Reiss (2009) reported that preschool and elementary school teachers (n = 117) who practiced the tenets of *Conscious Discipline* perceived a better school climate than those who did not practice these tenets (n = 89). The authors noted that teachers who practiced *Conscious Discipline* dealt with student behavior issues as learning experiences, using conflict resolution strategies rather than traditional methods of classroom management such as rewards and punishments. The results of this study also indicated that many of the teachers implementing the program showed improvements in student/teacher relationships and in mutual support among teachers.

#### *Purpose of This Study*

While previous studies have suggested that *Conscious Discipline* improves student outcomes and school climate, no research appears to have been conducted on the social validity of the program. The purpose of this study was to evaluate early childhood educators’ perceptions of the social validity of *Conscious Discipline*. Social validity is the extent to which an intervention or program is considered important and acceptable by stakeholders (Gresham, 1983). Social validity can pro-

vide insights into stakeholders' willingness to participate in the use of new programs and inform researchers and administrators of the relationship between program effectiveness and satisfaction in using the program (Hester, Baltodano, Gable, Tonelson, & Hendrickson, 2003). Social validity has three components: (1) the significance of program goals, (2) the appropriateness of the procedures, and (3) the importance of the effects (Wolf, 1978). Each of these components was examined in the current study.

### Method

#### *Participants and Setting*

Participants in this study were 17 early childhood educators (10 certified teachers and 7 paraeducators) from a public preschool program in the Intermountain West of the United States. The teachers had an average of thirteen years of teaching experience; the paraeducators had an average of three years of experience. All participants had received training in *Conscious Discipline* (consisting of seven 45-minute sessions conducted by an experienced trainer) and were implementing the program in their classrooms. Participants' experience with the program ranged from two to six years ( $M = 3.18$  years;  $SD = 1.42$ ). All participants were female and Caucasian.

The preschool, designed to serve students with special needs, was comprised of 244 students enrolled in special education and 113 students enrolled in Title I. Students were primarily male (64%), with an age range between 3 years 0 months and

5 years 7 months. The ethnicity of the students was as follows: 51% Caucasian, 46% Hispanic, 1.5% Pacific Islander, 1% Asian American, 0.5% African American. Students attended the preschool either full or half days, depending on their developmental needs.

#### *Measures and Procedure*

The survey, based on a similar survey created by Adams, Womack, Shatzer, and Caldarella (2008) to evaluate the social validity of school-to-home notes, was constructed to evaluate early childhood educators' perceptions of *Conscious Discipline*. The survey consisted of 12 items using a 5-point Likert response scale: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). Two additional open-ended questions asked for comments regarding strengths and weaknesses of the program. The participants completed the survey online during the last month of the academic school year (100% response rate).

#### *Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to examine participants' responses. Percentages and frequencies were calculated to determine the degree of agreement with each survey item. Agreement was defined as a response of 4 or 5 on the 5-point Likert scale. Pearson correlation coefficients were also calculated to examine whether both educators' years of teaching experience and years of experience using *Conscious Discipline* were related to their social validity ratings of the program.

The answers to the two open-ended

Table 1  
*Percentage of Participants who Agreed with Social Validity Survey Items*

Survey Item	Percentage
Social and emotional skills should be taught in preschool.	100.00%
I like the conscious discipline part of our preschool program.	94.12%
Conscious discipline should continue to be used next year in our preschool.	88.24%
Conscious discipline is an important part of my teaching interactions with students.	88.24%
Conscious discipline should be used daily in the preschool classroom.	82.36%
Conscious discipline improves my students' social and emotional functioning <i>in school</i> .	76.47%
I use conscious discipline with children outside of school (e.g., my children, nieces/nephews, grandchildren).	76.47%
Students like doing the conscious discipline activities.	58.82%
Students spontaneously use the skills taught, even after the conscious discipline activities are completed in class.	58.82%
Conscious discipline improves my students' social and emotional functioning <i>at home</i> .	47.06%
Conscious discipline takes too much time to implement.	5.88%
Conscious discipline is difficult for me to implement.	5.88%

questions were qualitatively analyzed by two members of the research team (a Caucasian male counseling psychology graduate student and a Caucasian female school psychology graduate student) to ensure inter-rater agreement. The researchers met after an initial review of the data, agreed on categories, and coded the responses into those categories. The researchers reviewed the participants' com-

ments, noting where their opinions differed and discussing these differences until they reached consensus, sometimes referred to as *check coding* (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### Results and Discussion

Table 1 highlights the percentages of participants who chose *agree or strongly agree* responses for each of the 12 survey

items. As noted previously, social validity examines three aspects of a program: (1) the goals, (2) the procedures, and (3) the effects (Wolf, 1978). All of the participants agreed that the goal of teaching social and emotional learning in preschools is important. Almost all of the participants also agreed that *Conscious Discipline* procedures were acceptable to them, as reflected in these teachers' positive responses to questions regarding time requirements, ease of implementation, and daily use of the program. Most participants also agreed that the program had a positive effect on their students and on themselves. In fact, 88% of the participants agreed that *Conscious Discipline* should continue to be used in the preschool the following year.

However, results suggest that not all students liked participating in the program's activities. Some participants also indicated that students did not *spontaneously* use the skills taught after the activities were completed in class, suggesting that some teacher prompting and reminding was necessary for students to use the skills. Improvements in students' social and emotional functioning at home were also not rated highly by participants, though this would be best evaluated by surveying parents rather than teachers.

Results revealed that the social validity ratings were positively correlated with both years of teaching experience ( $r = .55$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and years of experience using *Conscious Discipline* ( $r = .57$ ,  $p = .02$ ). Participants with more years of teaching experience and those with more experience using the program tended to rate it more positively than those with less experience.

Overall, the quantitative results reflect perceptions that the program was viewed as socially valid by these early childhood educators.

Most of the open-ended responses indicated that the participants believed *Conscious Discipline* to be socially valid. Many indicated that the program had helped them personally in their ability to regulate their own emotions. One respondent reported, "It helps me stay calm so I can model good problem solving and help the children when they are having a hard time at school." Many respondents also indicated that the program had positively impacted their relationships with spouses, children, and grandchildren. For example, one teacher wrote, "Conscious discipline has helped my marriage [and] my relationships with my own children, and I am teaching it to my children to help my grandchildren build better relationships and social skills." Referring to the program in general, one respondent stated, "Conscious discipline puts together the best of all the different discipline programs that I have learned," and another wrote, "Conscious discipline is easy to implement within any curriculum. It is a [consistent] way of thinking and being . . . that helps the children to increase their self-esteem and self-confidence while teaching lifelong skills."

Some participants indicated that *Conscious Discipline* takes a lot of practice and that it is difficult to implement the program while managing large class sizes. One respondent expressed a desire for additional resources and support (i.e., trainings, discussions, book groups) to help her use the program more effectively and consis-

tently. Another respondent made the following comment:

Conscious discipline has challenges rather than weakness. It is hard to change the way you have been thinking and reacting all your life. It's hard to treat children differently than the way you were treated as a child. The skill set is large and requires practice. I am still working on many of the skills but have had enormous success with what I have mastered or almost mastered.

The results of this study have implications for early childhood educator professional development. Due to a number of problems with traditional approaches, research-based standards to professional development are receiving greater emphasis in the United States (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). For example, schools which rely exclusively on external approaches to professional development (e.g., bringing in outside experts to conduct training) are not "powerful enough, specific enough, or sustained enough to alter the culture of the classroom and school . . . improvement above all entails 'learning to do the right things in the setting where you work'" (Wei et al., 2009, p. 1). To be most effective, teacher professional development should also be embedded in their work, based on teachers' assessment of student needs, and address skills teachers recognize as needed. Though not the focus of this study, results suggest that the early childhood special educators found the *Conscious Discipline* program met their professional development needs. Howev-

er, the success of professional development activities also depends on intensive and sustained efforts over time. The preschool in this study is continuing to implement the *Conscious Discipline* program in their school, with ongoing training available to educators. Another indication of support for the program is that the school district endorsed the adoption of the program by other elementary schools, suggesting the necessary commitment from school leaders often required for successful professional development activities (Wei et al., 2009).

It is important to note limitations of this study and future directions for research on *Conscious Discipline*. This study was conducted with a relatively small sample of early childhood educators of similar demographics working in one preschool. Another limitation was that social validity ratings were not solicited from other stakeholders such as parents, students, or administrators. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples of educators along with additional stakeholders, to provide a more complete evaluation of the social validity of the program. Furthermore, treatment fidelity regarding participants' consistent use of the program was not assessed, and student outcomes were not measured.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study suggest that the *Conscious Discipline* program was viewed as socially valid. As early childhood educators strive to implement school-based programs they should view the goals and procedures of those programs as socially appropriate and acceptable. Additionally, the program's



effects or outcomes should be viewed as socially significant. The teacher ratings in the present study suggest this was the case. This is an important finding, which correlates with earlier results regarding positive teacher perceptions of the program's effects (Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2009). Early childhood educators may wish to investigate the possibility of implementing *Conscious Discipline* as part of professional development activities in their schools and further evaluate the effects on both students and teachers. Such additional research on *Conscious Discipline* is needed.

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