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Long days and burdensome workloads are likely to affect an instructor's ability to manage a classroom, researchers find.

By Carla Rivera, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer January 11, 2008

Preschool teachers who are highly stressed because of classroom conditions, depression or other factors are far more likely than their colleagues to recommend expulsion for children with behavioral problems, according to a study released Thursday.

Conducted by Yale University's Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy, the study found that of teachers who reported high job stress, 14.3% also reported one or more expulsions in the last year, while 4.9% of teachers with low job stress reported expulsions.

The expulsions were also linked to high student-teacher ratios -- 12.7% of teachers reported an expulsion in classrooms with 12 or more children per adult, compared with 7.7% of teachers who reported an expulsion when there were fewer than eight children per adult.

Teachers who had students in extended-day classes (eight or more hours) also were more likely to recommend expulsion for students.

The study concluded that long days and burdensome workloads are likely to affect a teacher's ability to manage a classroom and deal effectively with children who act out.

As a result, the study says, children who would most benefit from preschool are also those most in jeopardy of being expelled.

"If there was a child who needed more help becoming ready for school, it is the child whose behavioral problems are so great as to cause his or her preschool teacher to no longer want that child in class," said study author Walter S. Gilliam, director of the Zigler Center.

The study found that teachers' education levels, possession of early childhood credentials and number of years of teaching young children played little role in expulsions.

Teachers who used support services, such as mental health consultants who are skilled in managing child behavior, were half as likely to report expelling a child. But only 23% of preschool teachers reported regular classroom support.

The study is a follow-up to a 2005 Yale report, also by Gilliam, which examined state-funded public preschool programs serving more than 800,000 children in 40 states.

It found that preschool children are three times as likely to be expelled than students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The rates are highest for older preschool students, African Americans and boys.

California's rate of 7.5 expulsions per 1,000 preschoolers exceeds the national average of 6.7.

Experts said there is no doubt that children are exhibiting more behavioral problems and at younger ages.

"There are lots of contributors, such as media, excessive television viewing, violent video games, stressed parents who are working too and not supervising their children," said Frances Page Glascoe, a professor of pediatrics at Vanderbilt University, who joined Gilliam during a telephone news conference.

"Behavior issues are increasing, but the availability of mental health services has not kept pace."

One of the major problems, Gilliam said, is that few states collect data on preschool expulsions as they do on expulsions of older students.

California does not have the money to track preschool expulsions, said Gwen Stephens, interim director of child development for the state Department of Education.

She said there have been only two cases in recent years in which parents have complained about actions taken against their children related to behavior issues.

But spurred in part by the 2005 study, the state is about to release standards for the 115,000 children enrolled in state-funded programs that will for the first time include guidelines for providers on social and emotional development as well as on language and math development.

Los Angeles Universal Preschool, an independent corporation formed in 2004 and funded by a tax on tobacco, created a pilot project that trains providers to screen children for mental, emotional and physical risk factors and refer them to community resources for support.

The Los Angeles County agency doesn't track expulsions, but the new program -- which includes increased teacher preparation, access to expert advisors and parent services -- is designed to keep children with challenges in class, said Relda Robertson-Beckley, a vice president of Los Angeles Universal Preschool. So far, the program is limited to 20 providers funded by the agency, but it will be required of all 349 of its contracted providers -- and reach about 8,000 children -- in 2008-09 school year.

Providers are also finding ways to improve classroom conditions. The preschool operated by Alma Family Services in East Los Angeles, for example, maintains an 8-1 student-teacher ratio for its 24 children, has on-site mental health experts and family support services, which have relieved pressure on staff, said director of program operations Lourdes Caracoza. She said no children have been expelled.

The agency was created to provide multiple services and includes an after-school enrichment program for children with developmental disabilities. About 10% of students in the preschool have special needs, including language delays, mental retardation and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

"If the child continues to be a problem, we can look to higher levels of care that includes case management and psychiatric care," said Alma's mental health director, Michael Segovia. "We're a real good example of what's working and why this type of support has been found to be so successful."