

Teachers' Judgments of Problems in the Transition to Kindergarten

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This article examined teachers' judgments of the prevalence and types of problems children present upon entering kindergarten. A large, national sample of teachers ($N = 3,595$) was surveyed by using the National Center for Early Development and Learning's *Transition Practices Survey* (1996). Teachers reported they perceived that 16% of children had difficult entries into kindergarten. Up to 46% of teachers reported that half their class or more had specific problems in any of a number of areas in kindergarten transition. Rates of perceived problems were related to school minority composition; district poverty level; and, for certain behaviors, school metropolitan status. The effects of these demographic characteristics were independent and additive. Teachers' ethnicity showed a significant relation to their rates of reported problems. Results are discussed in terms of risk factors that predict transition problems and the match between children's competencies and teacher's expectations. These findings confirm the view that entering kindergarten is indeed a period of transition for children.

In the past 15 years, policy makers, researchers, and educators have placed strong emphasis on ensuring successful entry into formal schooling (e.g., Meisels & Liaw, 1993; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

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[NICHD] Early Child Care Research Network, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1992; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, in press). Teachers' judgments about children's transition to school provide one of the earliest indications of children's ease of school entry, describe demographic and community characteristics that influence children's school performance, characterize the nature of kindergarten teachers' expectations, and reflect facets of the connection between home and school (e.g., Heaviside & Farris, 1993; Zill, 1999).

This article describes kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's problems upon kindergarten entry in a large, national sample of kindergarten teachers. Judgments of children's adjustment to kindergarten were examined in light of demographic features of communities and personal characteristics of the teachers. Ultimately, these judgments illuminate the extent to which teachers perceive need among the nation's school children, and describe teachers' perspectives on progress toward the first National Educational Goal that all children enter school "ready to learn" (National Education Goals Panel, 1998).

Rising interest in school transition underscores the challenge it presents to educators. Leading studies have found that children experience the transition to kindergarten as a qualitative shift along several dimensions (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992; Seppanen, Godin, Metzger, Bronson, & Cichon, 1993). Children come to school from diverse backgrounds, with a wide range of experiences, and enter classrooms and meet teachers with focused expectations for behavior and performance. Typically, the goals, demands, and nature of evaluation change as children leave preschool and enter kindergarten. For example, most kindergarten classrooms emphasize formalized instruction—instruction intended to raise the child's skill levels—more than do preschool environments. Because of the heightened academic goals associated with kindergarten and because children have had such diverse experiences preceding school entrance, some children are more successful than others in meeting these new demands. Thus, the transition into kindergarten poses a challenge to children and produces a wide range of responses to school transition among children.

Examination of teachers' judgments of the prevalence of children's adjustment problems at the start of kindergarten provides an early opportunity to assess the rates of successful school transitions. It is important to note that these teacher judgments are multidetermined. First, judgments are indicators of the actual skills and competencies of children in their classroom that, in turn, reflect children's prior socialization experiences and contact with community-specific developmental resources, which may have increased their likelihood of success in school (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; National Education Goals Panel, 1997; 1998). Second, judgments reflect teachers' expectations for kindergarten children, their notion of what it means for children to have a smooth entrance into kindergarten, and their perception of the challenges they face in helping children prepare for first grade, all of which have lasting effects on teacher-child relationships and children's achievement (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Entwisle & Alexander, 1999; Hamre & Pianta, 2000; Reynolds, 1989). Third, judgments may reflect teachers' personal attributes, such as ethnicity. For example, some evidence indicates that teachers' subjective evaluations of students may be more favorable for children with whom they share

the same ethnic background (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 1995), presumably because the child's behavior and values match the teachers' expectations.

Teachers' judgments of their incoming students reflect children's actual abilities and indicate the state of children's competencies. Not surprisingly, the state of these academic, social, and emotional skills on entering kindergarten are key predictors of later school success (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwisle & Alexander, 1999). Children with higher cognitive competencies at kindergarten entry have higher achievement test scores, are less likely to be retained in school, and are less likely to be referred for special education 3 years later (Pianta & McCoy, 1997). Preschool experience has been shown to contribute to such links: children with more comprehensive preschool experience tend to have a smoother adjustment to kindergarten (Gullo & Burton, 1993; Reynolds, 1989). Children's social competency, particularly in the way that children interact with peers, predicts school performance measures as well (Ladd, 1990). Finally, qualities of the family environment have direct and pervasive links to school achievement and school related problems (Zill, 1996). Thus, asking kindergarten teachers about children's competencies, home environments, and preschool experiences has practical and theoretical value because these areas of information both define the nature of early school adjustment and predict later school performance for subgroups of children.

Children's behaviors and competencies relate to structural variables, such as concentration of poverty, school minority composition, and metropolitan status, a link that is mediated partially by community-specific socialization processes. For example, preschool children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families show more externalizing behavior in kindergarten than do their higher SES counterparts (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). Home socialization processes provide the most likely explanation for this finding: low SES is linked to more marital conflict, harsher discipline strategies, and less maternal warmth (Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenze, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1992). Kindergarten children in urban communities exhibit more externalizing behavior in school than do those from rural communities. Although children from rural and urban environments have the same home-based risk factors for developing problems (e.g., low SES, marital instability, and single-parent status), the combined socializing influences of living in violent urban communities and attending schools with higher concentrations of "at risk" children produces the higher prevalence of behavior problems (Hope & Bierman, 1998).

The link between teachers' judgments of children's competencies and structural variables can also be explained in light of children's access to resources prior to kindergarten entrance. Communities and families provide services for preschool age children that are designed to increase the likelihood of school success. For example, quality preschool or childcare predicts ease of kindergarten adjustment (Howes, 1990), enhances preacademic competencies, and strengthens social and self-regulatory skills (Cost, Quality, & Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995). However, these resources are distributed unevenly across racial and geographic lines and can influence educational performance, cognitive performance, and socioemotional outcomes (Chase-Lansdale & Gordon, 1996; Reynolds, Weiss-

berg, & Kaspro, 1992). In particular, communities with high poverty and high minority populations may have fewer of such protective resources (e.g., Bowman, 1998; McLoyd, 1998; Ogbu, 1986; Ramey & Ramey, 1990; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990). As a result, teacher judgments of children's competencies are likely to reflect these structural variables.

Teachers' expectations of children at kindergarten entry influence their judgments of children's problems. Descriptions of kindergarten curricula point to explicit goals for literacy, numeracy, and socialization that are not formally stated goals of preschool classrooms. However, the expectations of kindergarten teachers when the children enter kindergarten do not illustrate these higher demands. In fact, preschool teachers tend to expect more from children entering kindergarten than do kindergarten teachers (Haines, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz, & Rosenkoetter, 1989). For example, a national survey of public school kindergarten teachers indicated that very few consider specific skills such as knowing the alphabet or being able to count to 20 critical for kindergarten entry. Instead, the majority of kindergarten teachers consider children ready for school if they are well-nourished and rested, can communicate their needs verbally, will show enthusiasm and curiosity about approaching new activities, and can take turns and share with others (Heavside & Farris, 1993).

Judgments of the rate of problems in their classrooms may also reflect teachers' perception of how difficult it is to teach their classes. Although teachers' views of child readiness show that kindergarten teachers expect fairly little from children as they enter school (Heavside & Farris, 1993), the nature of American schools requires that kindergarten children master many skills by the time they enter first grade (Freeman & Hatch, 1989). Thus, if children enter kindergarten less prepared, kindergarten teachers will believe that they have more work to accomplish to prepare children for the next school year. When teachers perceive that children entering school have difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills, or show other developmental lags, these perceptions place a burden on classroom teachers. The greater proportion of children in the classroom with these lags, the greater the workload for the classroom teachers, and the less attention the teacher can devote to the standard kindergarten educational program (Bowman, 1998). As a result, these findings shed light on contemporary challenges. As school standards become increasingly rigorous and higher levels of academic performance are expected in kindergarten, we can expect that teachers' judgments will show greater discrepancies between teachers' expectations and children's competencies.

Teachers' judgments about problems in the classroom must be evaluated in relation to teachers' attributes, such as their ethnicity, that may influence their closeness and identification with their students. Social distance may shape teachers' expectations of students' academic performance, and in turn, influence students' performance and teachers' subsequent judgments (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). For example, higher SES teachers tend to have lower expectations for minority and/or poor children and are apt to rate these children lower on measures of maturity and classroom behavior. Furthermore, children's first grade test gains reflect these different expectations and classroom ratings (Alexander,

Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987). Ethnic match between the teacher and the child may play a role in teachers' subjective evaluations. For example, high school African American students received higher subjective evaluations of school performance from African American teachers than from White teachers (Ehrenberg et al., 1995). Thus, teachers' characteristics may influence their expectations, past experiences, and relationships with children, which in turn may affect their judgment of children's problems.

In sum, teachers' judgments of problems reflect children's actual skills and competencies, teachers' expectations at children's transition to kindergarten, and teachers' attributes (such as ethnicity). These judgments are particularly important at the transition to kindergarten: success during the earliest years of school often forecasts later school success (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwisle & Alexander, in press). Although there is evidence suggesting that kindergarten teachers have fairly minimal expectations for children entering kindergarten, there is little research on kindergarten teachers' actual perceptions of the children's adjustment once they enter kindergarten. Further, little is known about the relations of teachers' perceptions, classroom demographic features, teachers' personal characteristics, and their implications for "school success" during the transition to kindergarten.

Thus, the present study addressed three questions. First, what are teachers' judgments of the prevalence and types of kindergarten transition problems? Second, do teachers' perceptions of the prevalence and types of problems increase as a function of poverty level, minority composition, and urban locale? Third, how are rates and types of reported problems associated with teacher's minority status?

METHODS

Survey Design

The Transitions Practices Survey (National Center for Early Development and Learning [NCEDL], 1996) was constructed by a review of the literature on transition to school and based on specific issues raised by the National Transition Study (Love et al., 1992). The survey, which reflected the NCEDL ecological conceptual framework (see Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, in press; also Ramey & Ramey, 1997) was designed to gather comprehensive information on transition practices used for children entering kindergarten and children entering first grade and to collect information on the prevalence of children's problems with the kindergarten transition. Questions asked about typically developing children as well as those with special needs.

The pilot survey was subjected to review, feedback, and revision from NCEDL's Consumer Advisory Board, research partners, and investigators. Two focus groups of kindergarten teachers (one at the University of Virginia site and the other at the University of North Carolina site) responded to the survey drafts on at least two occasions each. Kindergarten teachers refined question wording and formatting on five drafts of the survey.

Sampling Frame, Sample Selection, and Actual Sample

Teachers' names and addresses were purchased from the list of kindergarten teachers available through a commercial mailing list service, Market Data Retrieval (MDR). Their list contained 117,817 public school kindergarten teachers when we purchased our sample from them, during the fall of 1996. MDR estimated that their list included 98% of all teachers and updates their teacher names and addresses annually. The School and Staffing Survey of the U.S. Department of Education, estimated that there were 111,683 kindergarten teachers in public schools in 1993–1994 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). It appeared that this commercial mailing list was virtually complete.

We selected 10,071 public school teachers from MDR's list. This sample size was chosen to insure national representation and to accommodate our stratification system. We stratified the sample by using three levels each of poverty, minority composition, and metropolitan status and over sampled in cells of theoretical importance.

Poverty level was defined by MDR as the percentage of children in the school district from families with incomes below the poverty line, based on the 1990 census. The standard cut points suggested by MDR for poverty percentage level were used: 0% to 15.9% (low poverty), 16% to 29.9% (middle poverty), and 30% and greater (high poverty). Minority composition was defined as the percentage of children at the school who were Asian or Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Hispanic. MDR obtained this information from the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data. MDR's standard cut points for levels of minority composition were used: 0% to 15.9% (low minority), 16% to 50% (middle minority), and greater than 50% (high minority). Metropolitan status of the school was defined by MDR, using the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data locale code classification and included three categories: rural, suburban, and urban.

Cell sizes were selected to allow comparisons among groups of respondents, reflecting different combinations of the three sampling niches: metropolitan status, child ethnicity, and poverty level. Four cells were oversampled: rural/low poverty/low minority, rural/high poverty/high minority, urban/low poverty/low minority, and urban/high poverty/high minority. In addition, the suburban/low poverty/low minority cell was oversampled to ensure a reliable estimate of "nonrisk" respondents. The sampling goal was to obtain 400 respondents in each of the oversampled cells, ensuring proportion estimates within five percentage points and to receive 136 questionnaires for each of the other cells.

Questionnaires were addressed to the teachers by name at their schools and were mailed first-class mail over a 5-day period in late October 1996. Included with each questionnaire was a cover letter explaining the importance of the survey, how teachers were selected, information on how participants could learn the survey's results, and human participant's approval information. Teachers were supplied with a postage-paid business reply envelope to use in returning the completed questionnaire. A reminder postcard was mailed to all teachers in the sample approximately 1 week after the questionnaire was mailed. During the last

half of November, a second copy of the questionnaire was mailed to teachers who had not yet responded ($n = 8,388$).

The overall response rate was 36%: 10,071 questionnaires were sent to public school teachers and 3,595 completed questionnaires were returned. Although this response rate was somewhat lower than anticipated, the sampling strategy yielded a final sample that matched the nationally representative sample of kindergarten teachers obtained in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) School and Staffing Survey: 1993–1994 (see Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999).

Correlation analyses were conducted on the mean response rates and mean survey answers for each of the nine niches to determine whether or not there were systematic biases in responding. Higher teacher response rate was associated with higher percentage of reported successful entries into school ($r = .43, p = .02$), and likewise a lower percentage of reported difficult entries into school ($r = -.56, p = .002$). The correlation coefficients between teacher response rate and teachers who said that *about half the class or more* entered kindergarten with one of several specific problems ranged from -0.50 to -0.79 ($M = -0.57$) across nine problems. Thus, higher teacher response rate was correlated with fewer reported problems. Although this shows systematic bias in responding, the direction of these relations suggests that the reported findings are conservative. Concerns that teachers' who perceive higher rates of problems were more likely to respond to the survey are unfounded.

Poverty niche selection was based on district characteristics, whereas metropolitan status and minority composition niche selection was based on school characteristics. Because poverty levels of schools might be quite variable within a district, the district average is only a rough measure of school poverty concentration.

Detailed analyses of the teacher, classroom, and school characteristics of this sample and how these characteristics compare to the NCES School and Staffing Survey are reported in Early et al. (1999). A subset of these comparisons is summarized below.

Teacher Characteristics

Of the respondents, 46.5% had a master's degree or higher, a figure that is slightly higher than that estimated by the School and Staffing Survey (39.8%; Early et al., 1999). On average, the public kindergarten teachers had an average of 11.5 years of experience teaching kindergarten, with an additional 1.1 year teaching experience below kindergarten and 3.5 years teaching experience above kindergarten. Years of experience in this sample are roughly comparable to those of the Schools and Staffing Survey (Early et al., 1999).

This national sample of kindergarten teachers was 79.8% non-Hispanic White; 7.0% non-Hispanic African American, and 5.0% Hispanic. Nine percent of teachers checked Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Multiple Origins, or Other. See Table 1 for the distribution of minority teachers among the three levels of the minority niche.

Table 1. Distribution of Minority and Nonminority Teachers Among the Three Niches ($N = 3,448$)

Teacher Type by Niche	Number of Teachers
Nonminority teachers	2,713
Low minority	1,295
Middle minority	585
High minority	833
Minority teachers	735
Low minority	51
Middle minority	140
High minority	544

Classroom Characteristics

Respondents' classrooms had an average of 22.2 students, and 62% had a teaching assistant or paraprofessional aid. These kindergarten classrooms were composed of 60.4% non-Hispanic White children, 18.4% non-Hispanic African American children, and 14.6% Hispanic children. Teachers reported that 50.3% of the students in their classes were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Data Analysis Strategy

The NCEDL Transition Practices Survey data were analyzed by using SUDAAN (Research Triangle Institute, 1996), a data analysis package designed to analyze complex sample survey data. SUDAAN takes into account the stratification of the survey design when computing means and standard errors. For each question examined, both overall and subgroup estimates are presented by using three stratification variables: metropolitan status of the school, percentage of families in the school district in poverty, and percentage of minority students in the school. Each stratification variable was divided into three groups: metropolitan status into rural, suburban, and urban locales; poverty status into low (0–15.9% poverty), middle (16–29.9% poverty), and high ($\geq 30\%$ poverty); and minority status into low (0–15.9% minority), middle (16–50% minority), and high ($> 50\%$ minority). We compared responses across the three levels for each niche by using multivariate regression analyses.

Survey Questions Examined

The present study examines two survey questions. The first question asked, "Based on your experience, approximately what percentage of the children who enter kindergarten fall into the following categories?" Three categories followed: "very successful transition, virtually no problems"; "moderately successful entry, some problems, mostly minor"; and "difficult or very difficult entry, serious concerns or many problems." Teachers were asked that their responses for these three categories total to 100%. Because of our interest in transition problems and

because the three categories totaled 100%, only figures for “difficult or very difficult entry” will be reported.

The second question asked, “Based on your experience, for how many children in a typical class are the following characteristics a problem when they enter kindergarten?” Twelve problems were listed: 1) “lack of academic skills”; 2) “difficulty following directions”; 3) “difficulty working as part of a group”; 4) “problems with social skills, getting along with other children”; 5) “difficulty working independently”; 6) “difficulty communicating/language problems”; 7) “lack of any formal preschool experience”; 8) “highly academic preschool experience”; 9) “nonacademic preschool experience”; 10) “disorganized home environments”; 11) “immaturity”; and 12) “other.” For each problem, teachers were asked to check one of five boxes: *none*, *a few*, *about one fourth of the class*, *about half of the class*, or *more than half of the class*. Three problems; “highly academic preschool experience,” “nonacademic preschool experience,” and “other,” were eliminated from the analyses because of redundancy or the questions’ lack of clarity.

RESULTS

The analyses addressed three questions. First, what were the prevalence and types of teacher-reported kindergarten adjustment problems? Second, how did teachers’ reports of the rates and types of problems relate to school metropolitan status, district poverty level, and school minority composition, controlling for the other niche variables? Third, how were rates and types of reported problems associated with teacher characteristics, such as years of experience and teacher’s minority status?

Teachers’ Perceptions of Problem Prevalence and Type

Teachers reported that 52% of children experienced a successful entry into kindergarten, whereas 32% of children had moderately successful entries characterized by some problems, and 16% of children had difficult entries to kindergarten characterized by serious concerns or many problems.

Over one third of the teachers reported that *about half the class* or *more* entered kindergarten with specific problems, including difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills, disorganized home environments, and difficulty working independently. “Difficulty following directions” was the highest in prevalence with 46.16% of teachers reporting that *about half their class* or *more* entered kindergarten with this problem, whereas “difficulty communicating/language problems” was the lowest in prevalence with 13.50% of teachers reporting that *about half of the class* or *more* had this problem. See Table 2.

Prevalence and Types of Problems by Sampling Niches

Teachers’ reports of school entry problems varied depending on school metropolitan status, district poverty level, and school minority composition. Because

Table 2. Percentage of Teachers (Means and Standard Errors) Who Said that About Half of the Class or More Enter Kindergarten with Specific Problems ($N = 3,595$)

Type of Problem	Percentage of Teachers (<i>SE</i>)
Difficulty following directions	46.16 (1.07)
Lack of academic skills	36.26 (0.98)
Disorganized home environment	34.54 (1.00)
Difficulty working independently	34.39 (1.02)
Lack of any formal preschool experience	30.79 (0.99)
Difficulty working as part of a group	30.45 (0.99)
Problems with social skills	20.39 (0.88)
Immaturity	19.87 (0.87)
Difficulty communicating/language problems	13.50 (0.72)

of probable intercorrelations among the niche variables, these findings were examined by using a multivariate approach. Problem prevalence was examined while controlling for the other niche variables. Only findings of $p \leq .01$ are reported as significant because of the large sample size.

Multivariate regression analyses computed the relative contributions of school metropolitan status, minority composition, and poverty level on teachers' perceptions of the percentage of children who had a difficult adjustment to kindergarten. Metropolitan status, minority composition, poverty level, and all combinations of two-way interactions were entered simultaneously. The two-way interactions were not significant, thus, only the main effect models were interpreted. The results of this analysis showed that urban, rural, then suburban locale; higher levels of poverty; and higher minority composition predicted higher rates of teacher-reported difficulty in school transition. Thus, each niche variable contributed unique variance to predict rates of difficult adjustment. Table 3 presents Wald F values (the omnibus test of effects between levels of each niche while controlling for the other niches) and Beta for each predictor.

Logistic regression analyses determined the relative contributions of school metropolitan status, minority composition, and poverty level, controlling for the other niche variables, on the likelihood of teachers' reporting about *half of the class* or *more* entered kindergarten with a specific problem. Analyses were computed twice: once examining metropolitan status, district poverty, and school minority main effects only, and once examining the main effects and all possible two-way interactions. Out of 27 possible two-way interactions, only three were significant. Because these interactions were not systematic across problem types, and because they did not match a priori hypotheses, only main effect models were interpreted.

Logistic regression analyses revealed the following main effects: rural metropolitan status (compared to suburban or urban metropolitan status) predicted a higher rate of teacher-reported problems for one type of problem (disorganized home environment). Higher district poverty predicted higher reported problem

Table 3. Wald *F* and Beta Values for Multivariate Analyses Calculating Relative Contributions of School Metropolitan Status, District Poverty Level, and School Minority Status to Teachers' Judgments of Prevalence of Difficult Entry (*N* = 3,595)

Quality of School Adjustment	Beta	SE Beta	Wald <i>F</i> Value
School metropolitan status			4.26*
Rural	0.65	0.96	
Suburban	-1.38	1.04	
Urban	0.00	0.00	
District poverty level			19.15**
Low (0-15%)	-2.91*	1.13	
Middle (16-30%)	2.34	1.41	
High (31%+)	0.00	0.00	
School minority position			20.56**
Low	-6.40**	1.04	
Middle	-3.84**	1.19	
High	0.00	0.00	

Note. $R^2 = 0.06$. * $\leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

rates for seven of the nine specific types of problems. Higher school minority composition predicted higher reported problem rates for all nine of the specific types of problems. Table 4 presents Wald *F* values and odds ratios. As mentioned previously, the Wald *F* tests effects between levels of each niche (while controlling for the other niches.) The odds ratio represents the likelihood of the reported problem compared to the base case. For example, the Wald *F* shows differences among the three levels of metropolitan status for whether teachers reported that *more than half of the class* had school problems related to disorganized home environments. The odds ratios showed that the odds of such a response were 23% higher in rural schools than in urban schools and 15% lower in suburban than in urban schools.

Teacher Characteristics and Report of Problems

Teacher Ethnicity The data reported previously showed increases in teacher-reported problems as a function of school minority composition. This raised interest in the similarity between minority and nonminority teachers' perceptions of problem prevalence, and how these perceptions relate to the minority composition of the classroom. However, because so few minority teachers teach in low minority composition schools (only 51 of 735 minority teachers), the analysis was limited to middle and high minority composition classrooms. Analyses were conducted to address the following question: Do the nonminority teachers and minority teachers both perceive more problems in classrooms with high minority composition (51% and more) compared to classrooms with middle minority composition (15-50%)?

Separate regression equations were computed for minority and nonminority

Table 4. Wald *F* Values and Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Analysis Calculating Relative Contributions of School Metropolitan Status, District Poverty Level, and School Minority Status to Teachers' Judgments of Prevalence of Nine Problem Types (*N* = 3,595)

	Difficulty Following Directions	Lack of Academic Skills	Disorganized Home Environment	Difficulty Working Independently	Lack of Preschool Experience	Difficulty Working as Part of a Group	Problems with Social Skills	Immaturity	Difficulty Communicating
School Metro. Status	N.S.	N.S.	Wald <i>F</i> = 5.98*	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.
Rural	•	•	1.23	•	•	•	•	•	•
Suburban	•	•	0.85	•	•	•	•	•	•
Urban	•	•	1.00	•	•	•	•	•	•
District Poverty Level	Wald <i>F</i> = 10.33**	Wald <i>F</i> = 15.70**	Wald <i>F</i> = 14.30**	Wald <i>F</i> = 6.12*	Wald <i>F</i> = 8.08**	N.S.	Wald <i>F</i> = 6.88**	Wald <i>F</i> = 7.58**	N.S.
Low	0.62**	0.56**	0.63**	0.69*	0.76	•	0.65	0.64*	•
Middle	0.87	0.91	1.10	0.93	1.21	•	1.00	1.03	•
High	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	•	1.00	1.00	•
School Minority Composition	Wald <i>F</i> = 18.68	Wald <i>F</i> = 58.51**	Wald <i>F</i> = 46.84**	Wald <i>F</i> = 13.54**	Wald <i>F</i> = 24.62**	Wald <i>F</i> = 18.11**	Wald <i>F</i> = 13.82**	Wald <i>F</i> = 19.12**	Wald <i>F</i> = 65.75**
Low	0.53**	0.29**	0.33	0.57**	0.46**	0.49**	0.49**	0.43**	0.16**
Middle	0.83	0.49**	0.59**	0.84	0.54**	0.73*	0.83	0.71	0.31**
High	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Note. * ≤ .01, ** ≤ .001.

Table 5. Different Rates of Reporting Problems Between Nonminority and Minority Teachers Comparing Middle and High Minority Composition Groups (N = 2,202)

Quality of School Adjustment	Do teachers report more problems in schools with high minority composition (51%+) compared to medium level minority composition (15–50%)?		
	Nonminority Teachers	Minority Teachers	Is There a Teacher Ethnicity Effect?
Difficult entry, many problems	YES	YES	NO
Types of problem	Nonminority teachers	Minority teachers	Is there a teacher ethnicity effect?
Difficulty following directions	YES	NO	YES
Lack of academic skills	YES	YES	NO
Disorganized home environment	YES	NO	YES
Difficulty working independently	NO	NO	NO
Lack of any formal preschool experience	YES	NO	YES
Difficulty working as part of a group	NO	NO	NO
Problems with social skills	NO	NO	NO
Immaturity	YES	NO	YES
Difficulty communicating/language problems	YES	YES	NO

teachers. Each of the regression equations computed whether or not the group of teachers (minority or nonminority) reported a greater problem rate for schools with high minority composition or medium-level minority composition. The first two columns of Table 5 displays YES or NO based on this analysis (and using a $p < .05$). The final column, Is there an ethnicity effect?, reflects whether the minority and nonminority teachers match in their reporting of differences between the two levels of minority composition.

Table 5 shows that there were no differences by ethnicity in the teachers' reporting of percentage of difficult adjustments—both the nonminority and minority teachers reported more problems in the higher minority composition group than in the middle minority group. For four of the nine specific problem types, nonminority teachers reported more problems in the high minority composition groups than in the middle minority composition groups, whereas the minority teachers reported similar rates of problems in the high and middle minority composition groups. Specifically, nonminority teachers reported higher rates of “difficulty following directions,” “disorganized home environment,” “lack of preschool experience,” and “immaturity” for the high minority group than for the middle minority group, whereas minority teachers reported the same rate of problems for middle and high minority composition groups for these four behav-

iors. Thus, minority and nonminority teachers have different views on problem prevalence of four behaviors depending on minority composition.

DISCUSSION

A national sample of kindergarten teachers judged that approximately one sixth of the children entering kindergarten faced serious general adjustment problems. An additional one third of entering kindergartners had minor general adjustment problems. When asked about specific problems, difficulty following directions and lack of academic skills were the most common complications reported—between one third and one half of the teachers perceived that half or more of a typical class experienced these obstacles. There were modest relations between teachers' ethnicity and rates of reported problems such that nonminority teachers reported a higher rate of some problems in schools with higher minority composition than did minority teachers in schools with the same composition. These findings indicate that the nation's kindergarten teachers perceive a fairly high rate of the types of problems that can interfere with classroom success among children entering kindergarten. Further, this problem rate poses a considerable challenge to kindergarten teachers in their efforts to educate children. These findings confirm the need for the National Education Goal Panel's focus on early childhood so that "all children in America will start school ready to learn" (National Education Goal Panel, 1998), because, according to kindergarten teachers, many of the challenges faced by American schools are present as early as kindergarten.

The multidetermined nature of teachers' judgments requires that these findings be interpreted from several perspectives. First, these judgments reflect skills and competencies of children in their classroom, the presence of which may forecast later school achievement. Rates of competencies and problems are a function of demographic risk factors (Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993), may reflect children's prior contact with community resources designed to enhance children's likelihood of school success (Heaviside & Farris, 1993, National Education Goals Panel, 1998), and point to the fact that social stratification is evident as early as kindergarten (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Second, teachers' judgments reflect their expectations about kindergarten children, their understanding of what it means to have a smooth transition into kindergarten, and their perception of what they need to do to educate children so that they are prepared for first grade. Third, the judgments are associated with teachers' ethnicity (Ehrenberg et al., 1995). These characteristics may influence teachers' expectations and shape their beliefs about what is typical for a specific child or group of children.

Problem prevalence reflects the actual skills and competencies of kindergarten children. The findings indicate that children's competencies vary depending on the school metropolitan status, district poverty level, and school minority composition in which the teacher is currently teaching. More important, these factors operate *additively* such that teachers report high prevalence of problems if they teach in classrooms characterized by more than one of these factors (Keogh &

Weisner, 1993). No evidence for interaction effects was found. The relation between problem prevalence in kindergarten and high poverty level, high minority composition, and rural locale supports the notion that social stratification emerges even before children begin their formal education (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993).

The findings demonstrate that teachers' perceptions of kindergarten adjustment problems vary as a function of certain structural variables (poverty, minority composition, and metropolitan status). Socialization processes may account for some of these differences. For example, children living in environments with higher concentrations of poverty are more likely to experience certain day-to-day stressors (McLoyd, 1998) and be less equipped for the transition to school. Minority children may be socialized to conform to the academic and behavioral goals of their home environment, and these may be very different from those of their school environment (Garcia, 1995; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 1995; Slaughter & Epps, 1987).

Some communities anticipate the discontinuity associated with the transition to kindergarten and provide resources to ensure continuity from preschool to kindergarten (Greene, Mulholland, & Shaw, 1993; Ramey & Ramey, 1992); however, these resources are not distributed evenly across all communities. For example, low-income families are much less likely to enroll their children in preschool compared to high-income families (National Education Goals Report, 1996). Communities with higher minority and/or poverty representations implement fewer and less intensive transition to kindergarten practices than do those with lower minority and/or poverty concentration (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, *in press*). These findings demonstrate links between high minority and poverty concentrations and risk.

It was hypothesized that teachers would report more school adjustment problems in urban, but not rural, schools. Urban schools are more likely to possess concomitants of risk, such as larger class sizes, greater density of at-risk children, and fewer and less intensive transition to kindergarten practices (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; Pianta et al., 1999). Surprisingly, the present study demonstrates higher overall adjustment problems in rural than in urban schools. One explanation stems from the fact that rural schools have the highest rate of full day classes compared to all other locales (Heaviside & Farris, 1993). Because of the heightened demands associated with attending school for a full day, teachers may perceive children as having a more difficult adjustment to school.

The fact that teachers perceive and report that almost half of entering kindergarten children demonstrate major or minor problems in adjusting demonstrates the qualitative shift as children leave preschool and enter kindergarten. Teachers reported that a high proportion of their students have problems following directions, lack academic skills, and have difficulty working independently—all competencies reflecting the shifting expectations from socially oriented preschool goals to academically oriented kindergarten goals (Freeman & Hatch, 1989; Zill & Collins, 1995)—an emphasis that has become greater in recent years as expectations for students' performance have risen. In addition, teachers perceive that many of the children in their classroom come from disorganized home environments. This may reflect teachers' general concerns about the family

environment of children or even that teachers may be observing the phenomenon that families, as well as teachers and children, are affected by the transition to kindergarten (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Alternatively, this may reflect teachers' lack of knowledge and awareness of families' strengths.

The present findings suggest greater mismatch between teachers' expectations and children's competencies in areas with higher concentration of poverty and minority status. Teachers' perceptions of high problem rates for certain demographic groups may reflect a disjunction in culture between home and school that is particularly salient as children enter kindergarten. Because the transition to kindergarten is often accompanied by a shift in the prevalent ethnicity and/or poverty status of the people surrounding the child, behaviors that were acceptable in the home culture may be interpreted as problematic or "immature" by the teachers in school culture. Furthermore, because of expectations and past experiences with children of certain demographic profiles, teachers may reify the effects of poverty and/or minority status and identify a child as exhibiting a "problem behavior" based on other factors beside the child's actual behavior. These factors shape the types of expectations and beliefs teachers have about children, and more important, may have long lasting effects on school achievement (Meisels, Steele, & Quinn-Leering, 1993).

Finally, teachers' judgments of the prevalence of problems may reflect their own personal characteristics. As noted earlier, teachers' ethnicity plays a role in shaping their expectations, and for some types of problems, minority and non-minority teachers differed in their rate of reported problems. Compared to minority teachers, nonminority teachers perceive higher rates of difficulty following directions, disorganized home environments, lack of formal preschool experience, and immaturity in high minority composition schools. Two of these four categories—disorganized home environments and lack of formal preschool experience—refer to causal factors that exist outside of the classroom setting as opposed to issues of adaptation in school. Because of their own familiarity with same-race cultural norms and even their own awareness of how to contend with minority issues, minority teachers may be better at recognizing child and family strengths and understanding the challenges associated with negotiating boundaries between preschool, kindergarten, and home contexts (e.g., Garcia, 1995; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 1995). Differences in perception of difficulty following directions may reflect the disparate ways in which parents and teachers give directions as a function of their social class and/or race. If an African American and/or working class child is accustomed to responding to strong directive speech from his or her parent, he or she may appear to be noncompliant in response to the indirect command from a middle class and/or White teacher (Delpit, 1995). Likewise, teachers' identification of immaturity may stem from less familiarity with cultural norms of behavior.

Thus, the most comprehensive explanation for discrepancies between minority and nonminority teachers' judgments is that a teacher's own minority status may sensitize him or her to lack of congruence between children's home culture and school's mainstream culture (Slaughter & Epps, 1987; Slaughter-Defoe et al., 1990). This, in turn, may alter the teachers' expectations, influence his or her

perception of children's behavior, and cause him or her to accept a broader range of behavior. Because there are few minority teachers in low minority composition schools, the present study cannot examine this issue thoroughly.

Three limitations of the present study require attention. First, teachers were asked to make judgments about problem prevalence in a typical class based on their experience in general, not only their experience in their current classroom. We know that teachers change schools and that such changes may be systematic; for example, there is a higher rate of teacher attrition in schools with higher concentration of minority students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Furthermore, we acknowledge that these varied experiences influence teachers' judgments about children and recognize that we are unable to fully understand the complex origins of teachers' perceptions. However, the present study advances understanding as a *description* of current teachers' judgments; it covers a broad expanse, but does not claim to explain the origins of these judgments over time. Second, poverty level was described at the district level compared to minority composition and metropolitan status that were defined at the school level. There is reason to believe that a single district may be quite variable with regard to poverty, and that raises questions as we compare the three niches. Third, our analyses examined minority status, but only identified differences between Whites and non-Whites. The majority of the teachers and children categorized as minority were African American, but this category also included children and teachers of Hispanic and other ethnic origins.

In summary, the high rate of teacher-perceived adjustment problems may reflect a poor "fit" between children's competencies and aspects of the kindergarten classroom context, including teachers' expectations and classroom demands. These findings call attention to the need to better align children's competencies, their home environments, and their kindergarten teachers' expectations during this period of school entry. Furthermore, they highlight the importance that kindergarten teachers view children as individuals with distinctive sets of pre-school experiences, cultural values, and skills rather than on a one-dimensional scale of "readiness." Specifically, programs that incorporate cultural congruence by building on specific cultural beliefs and practices of children and their families are more likely to be successful in boosting children's competencies (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Consistent with the goal that all children enter school "Ready to Learn" is that the National Educational Goals Panel has been promoting strategies to prepare children to be ready for school and to prepare schools to be ready for children (National Education Goals Panel, 1998). These strategies target the disjunction between teachers' expectations and children's competencies, a timely issue in light of this large, national survey of kindergarten teachers. Finally, such transition policies and practices must be examined in light of the apparent discontinuities experienced by children and their families, schools, and communities as children leave one educational system, that of homes and preschools, and enter another, that of kindergarten and elementary school.

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