



Increasing Awareness and Empathy for Pre-Kindergarten Students: A First Year Pilot Program

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Introduction

Changing Perspectives (www.ChangingPerspectivesNow.org) is a national nonprofit organization based in Vermont that provides disability awareness programs in schools through a combination of curriculum materials and educator training opportunities. Its mission is to engage students in open dialogue and real-world experiences to promote disability awareness and foster inclusive communities. Schools across the country are dealing with issues of bullying and social isolation while at the same time being asked to meet the academic and emotional needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Awareness is the foundation of empathy. For students to achieve a greater sense of empathy, they must first develop an awareness and appreciation of differences.

This report presents findings from the 2017-18 classroom pilot field test of Changing Perspectives's PreK Empathy & Kindness Curriculum. The field test involved 12 schools in Vermont and Maine with about 300 students participating.

Description of the PreK Program's Curriculum and Coaching

Changing Perspectives's primary goals for the preK curriculum are to help young learners increase their own understanding and awareness of empathy, kindness, and what it means to have positive interactions with others.

Curriculum: The program is activity-based program and gives schools the tools, resources, and support to implement activities and lessons that align with schools' goals for early learning. Five curriculum units offer original lesson plans and a list of relevant, age appropriate books that complement social-emotional development goals and help to lay a foundation for essential social awareness and relationship skills.

- *Understanding Empathy* lessons support educators in mindfully and deliberately nurturing empathy as an essential life skill for their students.
- *Using Kind Language* lessons help educators introduce communication strategies that support emerging receptive language skills and vocabulary for expressive language around differences.
- *Learning about Others* activities help children explore how they are alike and different from their peers and the value of those similarities and differences.

- *Being a Good Friend and Community Member* lessons focus on helping students begin to understand what friendship is and how they are connected to their peers and community.
- *Interacting with Others* activities create opportunities for students to practice key skills and strategies for building healthy relationships.

Coaching: Changing Perspectives offers technical assistance to all partner schools as well as options for customized coaching. Whether individual or group, coaching aims to assist classroom educators, guidance counselors, and other school faculty in navigating and implementing the program to maximize student outcomes.

Pre-K Program Pilot Sites

During its pilot year, 12 schools in Vermont and Maine implemented the preK program:

- Barre City Elementary School – Barre, VT
- Barre Town Elementary School – Barre, VT
- Birchwood Day Nursery School – Windham, ME
- East Montpelier Elementary School – East Montpelier, VT
- Green Mountain Children’s Center – Hartford, VT
- Hartland Cooperative Nursery School – Hartland, VT
- Maple Leaf Children’s Center – Thetford, VT
- Samuel Morey Elementary School – Fairlee, VT
- Sharon Elementary School – Sharon, VT
- Valley Cooperative Preschool – Bradford, VT
- Watch Them Grow – Newbury, VT
- Westshire Elementary School – West Fairlee, VT

Of the 12 pilot sites, nine schools submitted data as part of this impact report.

Given the program’s highly customizable approach to design and classroom implementation, each educator’s instructional choices and style shaped the way the program was used at each pilot site. Some pilot sites implemented the program for a set number of weeks (i.e., as a 6- or 8- week unit) teaching one lesson per week, while other schools implemented the program as they saw fit throughout the pilot period.

Evaluation

For this pilot year, Changing Perspectives elected to conduct a formal evaluation of the program so as to inform the program’s design, development, and outcomes for student and educator learning. Dr. Cynthia Char of Char Associates, an independent evaluation firm based in Montpelier, Vermont, served as the external evaluation advisor, and collaborated on the study with Sam Drazin, the executive director of Changing Perspectives.

The evaluation's primary objectives were two-fold: (1) to gather formative feedback about the program to inform and improve the curriculum design and use, and (2) to evaluate the program's educational benefits and impacts upon student learning and educators' classroom practice.

Methodology and Sample: A variety of data collection methods were used to gather formative feedback and impact data about the Changing Perspectives curriculum from schools. These methods included educator post-program surveys and in-person site visits, during which a Changing Perspectives staff member observed and conducted student interviews.

Given that this was the program's pilot, all educators were new to using this program. The survey measured educators' views of their own professional development resulting from the program as well as their formative assessment of the curriculum and its value for students. A total of 13 educators from nine partner schools submitted surveys.

Of the nine preK sites that actively participated in the field test, three were selected for an in-person site visit. Site visits involved a Changing Perspectives staff member and videographer observing a lesson in action and then conducting post-lesson interviews with the educator and with several students.

Changing Perspectives developed an observational rubric (see below) to gain formative assessment of the lesson and student engagement with content; the rubric was not intended to be used, and was not used, as an assessment of the educator. The Changing Perspectives staff member conducting a site visit completed a separate rubric for each site visit.

Figure 1. PreK Site Visit Observation Rubric				
	High	Moderate	Low	Score / Comments
Student Engagement	3. Most students were actively engaged in lesson for entire duration of lesson.	2. Some students were actively engaged in lesson for most of lesson.	1. Few students were actively engaged in lesson.	
Lesson Intention	3. Most students demonstrated that they achieved lesson's learning intention.	2. Some students demonstrated that they achieved lesson's learning intention.	1. Few students demonstrated that they achieved lesson's learning intention.	
Skills Developed	3. Most students can demonstrate new skills developed as a result of lesson.	2. Some students can demonstrate new skills developed as a result of lesson.	1. Few students can demonstrate new skills developed as a result of lesson.	
Student Participation	3. All students participated in lesson at some point.	2. At least half the students participated in lesson at some point.	1. Less than half the students participated in lesson at some point.	

Student feedback was gathered through in-person interviews with students individually or in small groups. A total of 10 preK students were interviewed. Student interviews occurred after the teacher had taught a Changing Perspectives lesson of her choosing. In each interview, students were asked:

- What did you do today?
- What did you learn about?
- Why is it important to learn about _____? (fill in lesson topic)

Findings

Student Awareness of Empathy and Kindness: As noted, Changing Perspectives’s primary goals are to help preK learners increase their own understanding and awareness of empathy, kindness, and what it means to have positive interactions with others.

Educators regarded Changing Perspectives as generally successful in achieving its main educational goals for students. Ten out of 14 educators (71%) reported that Changing Perspectives met the educational goals of the program at least Moderately Well (29% Moderately, 29% Very, 14% Extremely).

Table 1. Success in Meeting Educational Goals

<i>The curriculum aims to increase students’ awareness of empathy, kindness, and support positive interaction with others. How well do you feel these goals were met?</i>				
Not At All	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
14% (2)	14% (2)	29% (4)	29% (4)	14% (2)

(n = 14)

Several teachers described particular ways they saw students responding positively to the curriculum:

- *We had one student that has been working hard all year with kind language with friends. After weeks of practicing and pointing out examples of kind language, the student saw a friend that was hurt and went over to him and helped him up and asked if he “needed help!” It was a huge moment to have that student show kindness.*
- *We really loved the activity where our kids had the opportunity to come up with a positive character trait about a classmate. It was really heartwarming to hear from each child regarding the positive attribute, for example “Jane is a good singer and dancer” was one child’s description of that person and “Joe is really helpful at saving people”*
- *After a lesson on empathy, we went to the playground. One child came and reported to me that he had been a very helpful friend because he let another teacher know that a peer was hurt. This child had chosen not to join in on the practice we had done in the classroom; obviously, however, he had been paying attention.*
- *After reading A Hat for Mrs. Goldman, we decided to create a Kindness challenge and students were very*

eager to demonstrate how easy it was to fill up our jar with pomp oms. They showed me that they really wanted to demonstrate how easy it was to be helpful and kind to their classmates. This behavior actually continued after the challenge ended.

In their interviews, students described what they had learned through Changing Perspectives. One student explained how one might identify a friend's feelings: "Because you can see their faces." Another student said they would help a friend who is feeling sad by "ask[ing] 'Do you want to play with me?'" A third student described the importance of learning about what feelings look like, saying: "So we know if someone's happy or sad or mad. Or surprised, or sleepy. And loving."

Educational Value: Educators were asked to assess the program's educational value across four key dimensions:

- Informational Value: How valuable was the actual informational content for students?
- Social-Emotional Value: How valuable was the content specific to the area of social-emotional development for students?
- Usability: How easy was the program to use and implement?
- Appeal to Students: How appealing were the lessons and activities for students?

Rating the curriculum's value using a 4-point scale (Poor, Fair, Good, Very Good), the majority of educators gave the program positive marks in the four different areas.

Twelve of the 13 educators (92%) rated the curriculum's social-emotional value as Good or Very Good. Usability and informational value were also regarded by most educators as Good or Very Good.

Table 2. Program's Educational Value

Educator Ratings	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good
Informational Value	8% (1)	15% (2)	38% (5)	38% (5)
Social-Emotional Value	--	8% (1)	38% (5)	54% (7)
Usability	--	15% (2)	46% (6)	38% (5)
Appeal To Students	--	31% (4)	38% (5)	31% (4)

(n = 13)

Open-ended responses from educators offered additional insights about the program's value for students:

- *[Its main value is] Helping them understand and accept differences, understand that what they say and how they act impacts others, and helping them to be more accepting.*
- *This program provides my students with a chance to view the world from different angles and I appreciate the book lists and suggested activities.*
- *There were many resources to help raise awareness about such important social emotional skills to help foster the foundation of their development.*
- *It's very nice to have most of the curriculum laid out in an organized fashion and have exactly what*

materials you need listed as well as a photocopy of an activity. The book lists were helpful, as well as accessibility to books.

Of responding educators, 69% rated the curriculum's appeal to students as Good or Very Good. In all three classrooms observed, student engagement and participation was rated as high. For example, students actively engaged through turn and talk opportunities with partners and answered educators' questions enthusiastically. A few educators offered suggestions for curriculum improvements, such as offering adaptations for each lesson (e.g., strategies to support students who have shorter attention spans or students who already had experiences with a topic) and including ideas for overarching projects (e.g., class emotion book).

Educator Capacity in Building Inclusive Classroom Communities: There are three main areas in which Changing Perspectives aims to support professional development for educators: (1) gain confidence and skills to support students in developing relevant social-emotional skills, (2) build classroom community within the inclusive classroom model, and (3) encourage positive interactions among all students. Educators rated how much they felt they had increased their confidence and skills in these three areas as a result of Changing Perspectives (5-point scale: Not At All, Slightly, Moderately, Very, Extremely).

Of 13 educators responding, 10 reported (77%) they feel at least moderately better equipped with relevant skills for building classroom community, as well as increased ability to encourage positive interactions among their students. Nine reported that they feel at least moderately more confident supporting students' social-emotional skills development.

Table 3. Professional Outcomes for Partner Educators

Educator Ratings of Professional Development Outcomes	Not At All	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
Better equipped with relevant skills in building classroom community within the inclusive classroom model	15%(2)	8% (1)	23% (3)	31% (4)	23% (3)
Better able to encourage positive interactions among ALL students	15% (2)	8% (1)	23% (3)	31% (4)	23% (3)
More confident and comfortable supporting students to develop relevant social-emotional skills.	15% (2)	15% (2)	23% (3)	23% (3)	23% (3)

Interest in Continued Use and Recommended Broader Use: Educators offered a solid endorsement of the program's value. Nine out of 12 educators (75%) indicated they would be interested in using the Changing Perspectives program again in the future, with two of the nine saying they'd use it if their school decided to purchase the program or their board would approve the cost.

Eleven out of 13 educators (85%) said they would recommend the preK curriculum to another educator:

- *I believe that the social curriculum is just as important as the academic curriculum. Students need to be taught how to read expressions, how to show empathy and how to look at the world from different perspectives. With more and more texting and emailing, adults as well as children are missing face to face interactions.*
- *It's an easy to follow social-emotional curriculum that teaches the very foundation of empathy and being kind, something that isn't usually completely disrupted yet at the preschool age, so instilling it a bit more at this level is great.*
- *It has a lot of great teaching points and outlines for different lessons that are great for teaching empathy to kids.*

Concluding Remarks

The Changing Perspectives's PreK Empathy & Kindness Curriculum pilot indicates that most educators and students had positive experiences with the new curriculum. The majority of educators expressed that the curriculum offered valuable resources and opportunities to support young children's social-emotional development and help lay the foundation for empathy and kindness.

References

Char, C. and Drazin, S. (2016) *Anyone Can Do Anything: Pilot Evaluation of the Changing Perspectives Disability Awareness Curriculum*. Report from Char Associates and Changing Perspectives, Bradford, VT.

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