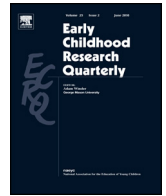




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# Workplace stress and the quality of teacher–children relationships in Head Start

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of the relationships between teachers and young children affects children's social and emotional development and their academic success. Little is known, however, about whether the amount of workplace stress experienced by early childhood educators impacts the quality of their relationships with young children. The purpose of this study was to determine whether workplace stress was associated with poorer quality teacher–children relationships in Head Start. Across 37 Head Start programs in Pennsylvania, 1001 teachers completed an anonymous, web-based survey about workplace stress and the levels of conflict and closeness in their relationships with children in their classrooms. We examined the associations between teacher–children relationship quality and the level of three types of perceived workplace stress: high demands, low control, and low support. Findings indicated that more workplace stress was associated with more conflict in teacher–children relationships. Interventions to address workplace stress should be evaluated for their potential to impact teacher–children relationship quality and children's social–emotional development.

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### Introduction

The interactions between young children and early childhood educators are critical to the development of children's social–emotional competence, which forms an important foundation for children's academic achievement (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Hyson, 2004; Raver, Blair, & Li-Grining, 2012). The quality of teachers' relationships with the children in their classrooms, as assessed by the teachers' reports, is associated in longitudinal studies with children's social–emotional competence and academic performance (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). Teacher–child relationship quality may be a better predictor of the child's outcomes than the teacher's education or other credentials (Early et al., 2006; Early et al., 2007).

To prepare children effectively for school, early childhood educators must do more than directly teach academic content (Ryan & Whitebook, 2012). To ensure positive teacher–child relationships, teachers must regulate their own emotions and model positive behaviors, such as having calm and predictable reactions, listening empathetically when children express negative emotions, and sharing feelings of joy when children express positive emotions. Much like parents, teachers must be sensitive, responsive, and predictable in their relationships with children to foster children's secure attachment and social–emotional competence (Belsky & Fearon, 2008; Berlin, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). These capacities may be difficult for teachers to maintain if they are experiencing significant stress.

#### *Teacher–child relationships in the context of the teacher's workplace stress*

The theoretical model that has guided the study of teacher–child relationships posits that these relationships are influenced by characteristics of the teacher as well as the context in which the teacher interacts with children (Pianta, 1999). From the teacher's perspective, the workplace is the school, early childhood education program, or larger educational system in which the classroom and individual teacher–child relationships are embedded. Stress in the workplace affects one's ability to function at work (Karasek

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& Theorell, 1990), and in the case of early childhood educators, such stress may have a negative impact on the quality of teachers' relationships with children.

The most widely studied model of workplace stress is the demand–control–support model, which describes how high workplace demands, low control, and/or low support raises the risk of negative psychological and physical outcomes that may lead to poor work functioning (Johnson, Hall, & Theorell, 1989; Karasek et al., 1988; Karasek et al., 1998). According to this model, the construct of workplace control incorporates both skill discretion and decision authority. Workers have high skill discretion when they have the opportunity to use all their abilities on the job, and they have decision authority when they have a say in how they approach tasks at work (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Workplace support, both from coworkers and supervisors, is considered to be a protective factor in the presence of high demands and/or low control (Johnson, Stewart, Hall, Fredlund, & Theorell, 1996).

In keeping with the demand–control–support model, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health defines workplace stress as occurring “when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker” (Sauter et al., 1999, p. 6), and according to the standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the requirements for the job of early childhood education include “building close relationships with children” (Hyson & Biggar, 2006, p. 287). There is evidence that early childhood educators experience high workplace stress (Curbow, 1990; Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell, & Breckler, 2000; Li-Grining et al., 2010). Although this may impair the quality of their relationships with children, we know of no studies that have specifically examined the association between workplace stress in early childhood educators and the quality of their relationships with children.

An association between perceived workplace stress and the quality of teacher–child interactions in early childhood education programs is suggested by The Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP). This was a randomized trial involving 18 Head Start centers and 94 teachers in Chicago, and was designed to test the effect of an intervention to improve teachers' emotionally supportive classroom practices (Jones, Bub, & Raver, 2013; Li-Grining et al., 2010; Raver et al., 2008; Raver et al., 2009; Raver et al., 2011; Zhai, Raver, & Li-Grining, 2011). Workplace stress was hypothesized to be one factor impacting classroom practices. The intervention consisted of teacher trainings on classroom behavior management techniques and the use of mental health consultants to coach teachers on these techniques as well as stress reduction. In this study, workplace stress was assessed with the Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory (CCW-JSI) (Curbow et al., 2000), which assessed perceived demands, control, and resources (positive feelings or satisfaction about work), but not support. The Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) was used to assess the quality of the relationships between Head Start teachers and individual children in their classrooms (Pianta, 2001), and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) was used to assess the observed emotional support in the classroom (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). The intervention showed positive impacts on teacher–child relationship quality (Jones et al., 2013), the emotional support in the classroom (Raver et al., 2008), and two aspects of workplace stress (increased control and resources, but not lower demands) (Zhai et al., 2011).

Despite these findings from the CSRP, the linkages between workplace stress and the quality of teachers' relationships with children remains uncertain. At baseline, the CSRP investigators did not administer the STRS (Jones et al., 2013), but they found no significant relationship between measures of workplace stress and the observed emotional support in the classroom—a construct which is related to but distinct from teacher–child relationship quality (Li-Grining et al., 2010). Although there have been detailed mediation

analyses of the CSRP impacts (Jones et al., 2013; Raver et al., 2011), these analyses have not examined whether the positive impacts of the intervention on reducing some aspects of workplace stress explained the impacts on either teacher–child relationship quality or the observed emotional support in the classroom. In addition, the study did not assess workplace support, which is widely regarded as a key domain in workplace stress (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Aside from CSRP, we know of no other studies, either experimental or observational, that have examined the association between teachers' workplace stress and teacher–child relationship quality in the early childhood education setting.

#### *Workplace stress and teacher–child relationships in Head Start*

Head Start is the largest systematic effort in the U.S. to address the disparities in school readiness between children living in poverty and their more-advantaged peers. Like all early childhood educators, Head Start teachers may face many workplace demands (Li-Grining et al., 2010; Zhai et al., 2011). They must keep children physically safe and emotionally secure, provide instruction to meet learning outcomes, and communicate effectively with families and coworkers. Head Start teachers may experience even higher demands as they work with many children who exhibit a number of behavioral and emotional difficulties, which can be challenging to manage in the classroom, and which often arise from the stressful social circumstances associated with living in poverty (Aikens et al., 2010; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Further adding to the stress of Head Start teachers are demands for accountability that include large amounts of paperwork and documentation. Because child outcomes in Head Start have not consistently met expectations (Barnett, 2011; Ludwig & Phillips, 2007; Puma et al., 2010), policy makers are increasing their focus on the role of teachers in achieving those outcomes (Rhodes & Huston, 2012; Ryan and Whitebook, 2012; Shonkoff, 2011).

Teachers may experience low control, for example, if they are not given sufficient autonomy to use specific skills and interests they bring to the workplace, obtain new skills, or adapt teaching curricula to meet children's needs (Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk, 2009). Work shifts are usually long and highly structured and do not allow flexibility for meeting personal needs, such as obtaining professional training, seeking health care, or responding to family emergencies. When supervisors and colleagues also find themselves faced with high demands, workplace stress can be exacerbated by the lack of emotional and instrumental support received from colleagues at work. This can range from a lack of empathy or respect to a lack of technical or practical advice in meeting challenges at work.

In studies examining how workplace stress relates to health and functioning outcomes in various occupations, the three distinct types of stress—high demands, low control, and low support—are often cumulative or additive in their effects rather than interactive, such as when one type of stress (e.g., support) modifies the effect of another type of stress (e.g., demands) on a particular outcome (Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010; Van der Doef & Maes, 1998). Individuals may vary in their perceptions of these three stressors or the manner in which they jointly affect behavior, but taken together, these stressors may impair teachers' relationships with children by consuming teachers' cognitive and emotional resources. Workplace stress may make teachers more fatigued, preoccupied, inattentive, frustrated, or irritable, which could influence levels of closeness or conflict in their relationships with children (Curbow et al., 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2004).

Teacher depressive symptoms have been linked with less sensitive and engaged interactions with children (Hamre and Pianta, 2004) and more teacher–child conflict (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008). There are many mechanisms by

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