



Early childhood educators' knowledge, beliefs, education, experiences, and children's language- and literacy-learning opportunities: What is the connection?



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we investigated how multiple types of knowledge and beliefs, along with holding an early childhood-related degree and teaching experience, were linked to amounts of early childhood educators' language and literacy instruction. Quantile regression was used to estimate associations between these variables along a continuum of language and literacy instruction for 222 early childhood educators. In general, low levels of language- and literacy-related instruction were observed; however, the use of quantile regression afforded unique insight into the associations of knowledge, beliefs, education, and teaching experience with instruction when levels of instruction were sufficient. These findings would not have been visible with traditional, linear regression models. Specifically, two types of knowledge were examined: disciplinary-related content knowledge about the structure of language and knowledge for use in teaching language and literacy to young children. Only educators' disciplinary content knowledge was associated with amount of instruction. Associations between beliefs about language and literacy instruction and amount of instruction were less consistent. Generally, holding an early childhood related degree was positively associated with language and literacy instruction whereas teaching experience was negatively associated with the amount of instruction. Implications for studying educators and understanding the associations among educator characteristics and instruction are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A wealth of knowledge exists concerning young children's development of language and literacy skills and the importance of these skills for success in formal school settings (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). This research has led to a growing knowledge base about the type of language- and literacy-learning experiences young children need in order to develop these skills (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, evidence also suggests that early childhood

educators do not always provide the types of instruction necessary to ensure the development of children's skills. Researchers have examined language and literacy instruction in early childhood settings in a variety of ways including: rating the language interactions between educators and children (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008), measuring the classroom literacy environment (Early et al., 2007), or calculating the amount of time spent in language and literacy instruction (Fuligni, Howes, Huang, Hong, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2012; Pelatti, Piasta, Justice, & O'Connell, 2014; Sandvik, van Daal, & Adèr, 2014). Regardless of approach, in general, the quality and quantity of educators' language and literacy instruction have been less than optimal.

One response to research showing lower quality and quantity of instruction in early childhood settings has been to learn more about characteristics of educators to gain insights as to how to improve instruction. Specifically, educators' knowledge and beliefs are theoretically linked with instruction, and both have been empirically examined in efforts to understand more about how these

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contribute to instruction. In addition, educators' education and teaching experiences are often considered as contributing to the development of knowledge and beliefs and, thus, are also frequently studied as these relate to instruction. Learning more about these associations is important, as knowledge, beliefs, education, and teaching experience are malleable aspects of educator preparation and training on which we can "intervene" in efforts to shift instruction to improve children's outcomes. These investigations, however, have not always clearly illuminated the connections between educators' characteristics and instruction. When taken as a whole, the equivocal findings across this body of work leave important gaps in the literature for those interested in improving instruction. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to further examine the associations of knowledge, beliefs, education, and experience with instruction in order to expand our understanding of the complex ways in which these might be linked to the language and literacy instruction that educators provide.

1.1. Knowledge

Educator knowledge is theorized to be related to classroom instruction and subsequent child outcomes (Grossman, 1990; NAEYC, 2009; Shulman, 1987; Wasik & Hindman, 2011). Knowledge is important for teaching because educators could use information to make instructional decisions in their classrooms (Lampert, 2001; Turner-Bisset, 1999). Knowledge is a multifaceted construct, and theorists and researchers have identified and examined many types of knowledge that may be related to instruction (Ben-Peretz, 2011; Borko and Putnam, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 1988; Shulman, 1987). In particular, early childhood researchers have examined multiple types of educators' knowledge, including disciplinary content knowledge (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009), conceptual and procedural knowledge of language and literacy (Hindman and Wasik, 2011), and knowledge that educators "use in [for] practice" (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009, p. 544). Researchers have also examined pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) in terms of educators' reports of their knowledge of strategies for teaching phonological awareness and vocabulary, and found that such knowledge tended to reflect incomplete understandings of how children develop those skills (O'Leary, Cockburn, Powell, & Diamond, 2010). When measuring these different types of knowledge, each research team used their own measures and, across the board, educators generally scored low on these measures of knowledge.

Researchers have also examined how these different types of educator knowledge are associated with instruction. For example, Piasta, Connor, Fishman, and Morrison (2009) examined educators' knowledge of English language and literacy, accessing educators' disciplinary content knowledge or knowledge about the content they were teaching. They found that higher disciplinary knowledge predicted children's literacy outcomes when examined in combination with time in decoding instruction. Thus they linked educators' disciplinary content knowledge with their instruction. In contrast, Cash, Cabell, Hamre, DeCoster, and Pianta (2015) examined a different type of knowledge, looking at educators' understanding of children's skill development within specific language and literacy developmental domains. Although they measured a variety of child outcomes, they found that educators' knowledge only predicted gains in children's expressive vocabulary and print knowledge. Implicit in their findings is the notion that knowledge informs instruction which can then be linked to children's learning. Both of these findings about knowledge, however, are specific to the types of knowledge measured.

These findings regarding the associations between knowledge and instruction are difficult to disentangle given the multiple ways that knowledge is assessed and are further complicated by a lack of

understanding about the ways changes in knowledge contribute to changes in educators' instruction. One of the most common mechanisms for affecting this change is the use of professional development (PD) models; however, recent research indicates that even when PD models have been successful in changing educators' scores on measures of knowledge used for practice (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009) or disciplinary content knowledge (Carlisle, Correnti, Phelps, & Zeng, 2009), there are not necessarily changes in educators' instruction. In these cases the associations between new knowledge and instruction are unclear. Moreover, sometimes changes in educators' knowledge does not result in improved outcomes for children (Cunningham et al., 2009; Gerde, Duke, Moses, Spybrook, & Shedd, 2014), suggesting that the type of knowledge measured, in these cases disciplinary content knowledge and "knowledge of emergent literacy" (p. 427), may not always be linked to language and literacy instruction.

1.2. Beliefs

Researchers have also theorized that educators' beliefs are related to instruction (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992) and that what educators believe impacts what they do in the classroom (Clark and Peterson, 1984; Guskey, 2002). Included in the conception of beliefs are educators' values and assumptions (Evans, Fox, Cremaso, & McKinnon, 2004; Fenstermacher, 1994) and some have argued that beliefs are interrelated with knowledge (Hindman and Wasik, 2008). Like knowledge, this somewhat nebulous concept has been measured in a variety of ways by early childhood researchers, with mixed findings as to whether or not educators' beliefs are associated with instruction in empirical studies.

Although educators tend to report beliefs that support research-based recommendations for language and literacy instruction (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Hindman & Wasik, 2008), how these beliefs are connected to educators' enacted instruction is less clear. For example, Sandvik et al. (2014) found that educators' reported beliefs aligned with current research, yet educators' reported instruction was not consistent with these beliefs. In other words, educators reported spending very little time in high quality language and literacy instruction in contrast to their reported beliefs both about how children develop skills and their roles as educators in that process. Conversely, other research indicates that educators' beliefs seem to match observable instruction related to educator-child interactions (McMullen et al., 2006). There is also emerging research demonstrating no associations between educators' beliefs and outcomes for children. Cash et al. (2015) measured educators' beliefs about language- and literacy-related skills children need as they enter preschool and found that these beliefs were not connected with children's scores. They suggest that, at least based on their data, educator knowledge is more important for instruction than beliefs. Finally, similar equivocal patterns are present in the PD research, which has found mixed results in the malleability of beliefs and instruction. Some efforts have led to changes in beliefs and instruction (Hamre et al., 2012) whereas others have not found these co-occurring changes (Breffini, 2011).

1.3. Education and experience

Education and previous teaching experiences can be seen as proxies for knowledge and beliefs as these experiences may contribute, directly or indirectly, to the development of these constructs. Although the nature of these associations is difficult to disentangle, there is evidence of the influence of these background experiences on knowledge and beliefs (Berliner, 1986; Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Jung & Jin, 2014; Nelson, 2015). For example, Hindman and Wasik (2011) found that educators' procedural and conceptual knowledge about language and literacy

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