Preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about early school competencies: Misalignment matters for kindergarten adjustment

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Early Childhood Longitudinal-Birth Cohort data were used to examine the extent to which preschool and kindergarten teachers aligned in their beliefs regarding the importance of school competencies at kindergarten entry, whether misalignment in beliefs predicted academic and sociobehavioral adjustment in kindergarten, and if relations were moderated by children’s socioeconomic status. Preschool and kindergarten teachers rated the importance of 12 skills categorized into domains of academic, self-regulatory, and interpersonal competence. In the fall of kindergarten, children were directly assessed on reading and math skills, and kindergarten teachers rated children’s approaches to learning, disruptive behavior, and social behavior. Findings revealed (a) misalignment was greatest for teachers’ beliefs about the importance of academic competence (b) greater misalignment in beliefs pertaining to all three domains of competence predicted poorer ratings of approaches to learning, social skills, and lower math achievement, and (c) children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds were more susceptible to the negative influence of misalignment, across adjustment outcomes, compared to their more-advantaged peers. Results are discussed in relation to efforts aimed at promoting alignment within children’s early educational contexts.

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Introduction

Interest in the alignment and coordination of educational objectives, curricula, assessment, and teacher qualifications across preschool and the early grades of the K–12 system is growing among educators, researchers, and policy makers (Bogard & Kagan, 2005; Kagan & Kaurer, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This momentum is driven in part by mounting research linking alignment features in the early years of children’s schooling to enhanced academic and sociobehavioral adjustment during the elementary years and beyond (Bogard & Kagan, 2005; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2012; Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2010). Alignment between preschool and kindergarten contexts may be particularly important given research linking a poor transition experience to later adjustment problems (Lloyd, Steinberg, & Wilhelm-Chapin, 1999).

Despite a heightening focus on alignment, many alignment features remain unexamined. Teacher beliefs are one example. In the context of early education, preschool and kindergarten teachers hold beliefs about what children need to know and be able to do in order to be best-prepared to enter formal schooling, typically kindergarten in the United States (Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Kowalski, Pretti-Frontczak, & Johnson, 2001; Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; West, 1993). Such beliefs are important to consider because they help shape teachers’ expectations for and interactions with children, instructional practice, classroom climate, and children’s performance (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Fang, 1996; Staub & Stern, 2002; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999; West, 1993). Extant work points to a misalignment in preschool and kindergarten teachers’ belief orientations regarding the importance of academic, self-regulatory, and interpersonal competencies at kindergarten entry (Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz, & Risenkoetter, 1989; Pietrzkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000), implicating teacher beliefs as an alignment feature worthy of examination.
The present study examined whether children’s exposure to preschool and kindergarten teachers with differing beliefs about early school competencies predicted their academic and sociobehavioral adjustment to kindergarten, and whether children were differentially affected by belief misalignment. This line of inquiry is important given ongoing efforts to identify malleable characteristics of the classroom context that can be targeted via intervention and leveraged to enhance educational quality, maximize children’s success in early school, and ultimately improve efforts to replicate and expand high-quality early education programming (Reynolds et al., 2010).

Teacher beliefs about the importance of early school competencies

Researchers have examined preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about the importance of early school competencies—including academic, self-regulatory, and interpersonal capacities—for kindergarten teachers (hereafter abbreviated to teacher beliefs) independently (Bassok et al., 2014; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Kowalski et al., 2001; Lin et al., 2003; West, 1993) and in comparison to one another (Hains et al., 1989; Piotrkowski et al., 2000). From these studies, a clear pattern of misalignment in preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs has emerged. Although both groups of teachers tend to rate academic skills (e.g., knows the letters of the alphabet, counts to 20 or more) lower than either interpersonal (e.g., sensitive to others, takes turns and shares) or self-regulatory competencies (e.g., follows directions, sits still and pays attention), preschool teachers tend to emphasize interpersonal over self-regulatory abilities when compared to their kindergarten counterparts (Hains et al., 1989; Piotrkowski et al., 2000). Further, preschool teachers rate more types of competencies as important, while kindergarten teachers are more discriminating (Hains et al., 1989; Piotrkowski et al., 2000). This means that even though preschool and kindergarten teachers share some agreement on the overall prioritization of early school competencies, there likely remain discrepancies in the extent to which the two groups endorse a particular domain of competence.

Teachers’ beliefs are shaped, at least in part, by their experiences during preservice training and as a practicing teacher in the classroom (Kagan, 1992). Currently in the United States, educational requirements for preschool teachers (who provide educational programming and care to children primarily three to five years of age, who sometimes attend for multiple years) vary from state to state, ranging from a high school diploma to bachelor’s degree. In contrast, all 50 states require public school kindergarten teachers to have a bachelor’s degree and state license. In the U.S. children typically enter kindergarten, considered the start of formal schooling, at age 5 or 6 and attend for 1 year before moving on to first grade. Moreover, there is considerable variability in the extent to which training programs focus specifically on child development and early childhood education and provide prospective teachers with hands-on opportunities in the classroom (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a, 2014b). Given the discrepancies in educational requirements for preschool and kindergarten teachers, it is not entirely surprising that belief patterns can be tied to educational training in either an early childhood or elementary program (File & Gullo, 2002). Thus, a finding that misalignment in teachers’ beliefs hinders children’s adjustment to kindergarten could have implications for teacher training and professional development.

Educational policy might also play a role in shaping teacher beliefs. For example, results from a recent study point to an increase on the emphasis of academic competence among kindergarten teachers in the decade following No Child Left Behind (Bassok et al., 2014), a U.S. federal standards-based K–12 education reform effort emphasizing achievement in core subject areas including reading and math. Although kindergarten teachers continued to rate academic skills as less essential than self-regulatory and interpersonal competence, there was a dramatic increase in the importance kindergarten teachers placed on academic skills. Accompanying this change was a parallel shift in teachers’ instructional focus on literacy. In this way, No Child Left Behind may have contributed to a deeper division among preschool and kindergarten teachers because, in general, preschool teachers were under less scrutiny compared to educators in the K–12 system. This finding by Bassok and colleagues (2014) also points to the need to reexamine preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about early school competencies given that the other studies examining similar beliefs were conducted prior to the enactment of this influential reform.

Does misalignment matter?

Although research highlights a divide in preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about early school competencies (Hains et al., 1989; Piotrkowski et al., 2000), nothing is known about whether exposure to such misalignment affects how children adjust academically and sociobehaviorally to the kindergarten classroom. On the one hand, exposure to misalignment in preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs may simply exemplify one of the many ways in which children experience discontinuities within early schooling, and may have little bearing on their performance in kindergarten. After all, U.S. children almost inevitably change school, teacher, and/or peer group between preschool and kindergarten. From this perspective, a shift in teacher beliefs may be a relatively inconsequential contextual difference amid all the changes occurring during this transitional period. On the other hand, a growing body of empirical evidence points to educational alignment—educational components (e.g., standards, curricula, assessment, teacher qualifications) that are similar, complementary, coordinated, or sequenced from grade to grade—as a factor promoting children’s adaptive functioning (Bogard and Takanishi, 2005; Reynolds et al., 2010), suggesting other alignment features, such as teachers’ beliefs, could influence kindergarten adjustment.

Examples of effective alignment features vary greatly. Particularly comprehensive alignment efforts are reflected in experimental “model” early education programs including the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Center and Expansion Program, in which low-income children were provided with sequenced curricula, family services, summer programming, and other complementary components across the early years of schooling (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Reynolds & Temple, 1998). Children attending these programs for multiple years experienced greater benefit in terms of academic achievement, compared to peers receiving less comprehensive or fewer years of programming (Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Campbell et al., 2002; Reynolds & Temple, 2008). Alignment features outside of purposefully designed interventions also show promise. For example, in a nationally representative sample of children’s normative educational experiences, alignment features including staying in the same school, having a certified teacher, and experiencing large amounts of instruction in reading and language arts from preschool to third grade, when experienced as a package, were associated with better developmental outcomes and fewer incidents of grade retention and special education placement (Reynolds et al., 2010).

Preschool to kindergarten transition practices occur over a shorter duration of time and are typically less extensive than programs targeting the preschool-to-third grade early education continuum (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999), but share the common goal of promoting continuity and minimizing disruption to children’s learning and development (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). Research on teachers’ use of transition practices in relation to school adjustment lends additional evidence.
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