



Cultural diversity in teachers' group-centered beliefs and practices in early childcare



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relation between teachers' cultural backgrounds, their beliefs regarding group processes, their actual support of group processes, and children's behavior in center-based childcare in the Netherlands. For this purpose, 57 teachers of native Dutch and immigrant Moroccan-Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch, and Antillean-Dutch backgrounds were interviewed about their teaching beliefs and observed while engaging in a constructive play activity with small groups of children. Clear cultural differences in beliefs and corresponding behavior were found. In the interviews, the Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch teachers mentioned concepts relating to group processes more often than the Dutch and Surinamese- and Antillean-Dutch teachers did, and they showed higher support of group processes during play. Moreover, the degree to which teachers expressed beliefs in group processes was significantly correlated with support of group processes by the teacher and with levels of collaboration and cognitive engagement in children's play. Structural equation modeling was applied to test direct and indirect effects, confirming the hypothesis that comparatively elaborate beliefs of teachers on group processes result in practices supporting group processes as well as more collaboration and cognitive engagement in children's play.

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1. Introduction

The last decades have shown a strong increase in the number of professional teachers with non-Western cultural backgrounds working in non-familial, center-based childcare provisions in Europe, the United States, and many other countries (Huijbregts, Tavecchio, Leseman, & Hoffenaar, 2009; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2006; Wishard, Shivers, Howes, & Ritchie, 2003). Due to this increase, nowadays, many children in childcare have teachers from other cultures than their own (Greenfield, Flores, Davis, & Salimkhan, 2008), which could lead to cultural conflicts regarding important socialization goals and teaching practices, and hence pose a threat to the quality of care (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003; Rosenthal, 2003). While recognizing the possibility of cultural conflict, the present study seeks to identify the potential contribution of non-Western cultural ideas on childrearing and socialization to center-based childcare, focusing specifically on beliefs regarding group processes and the

importance of socialization in the group. The relevance of focusing on group processes is clear. In childcare centers, two teachers usually share care for groups of 14 children on average (OECD, 2011). Current definitions of childcare *process* quality, based on mother-child attachment models with the teacher's sensitivity to individual children as hallmark of quality, do not fully capture the group-based nature of childcare (Ahnert, Piquart, & Lamb, 2006; Burchinal, 2010; Rosenthal, 2003; Singer, 1993). In this context, non-Western teaching beliefs and practices emphasizing sociocentric values and group processes, can add to the quality of group-based childcare settings (Tobin, 2005).

Cultural diversity in childcare has been widely investigated, but most studies have focused on the differential (e.g. compensatory) effects of childcare on developmental outcomes for children from different cultural groups (Johnson, Jaeger, Randolph, Cauce, & Ward, 2003; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). A few studies examined the importance of a cultural match between children and their teachers (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003; Barbarin, Downer, Odom, & Head, 2010), indicating that a match as such may be less important for child outcomes than providing care that meets widely accepted quality standards (in particular low authoritarian control and high emotional support). However, other studies stress the need to develop culture-sensitive quality standards (Johnson

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et al., 2003; Keels, 2009; Rosenthal, 2003) or propose to critically re-examine the cultural validity of existing childcare quality measures (Burchinal, 2010). The beliefs and practices of teachers with different cultural backgrounds regarding children's engagement in group processes, the topic of the current study, is an obvious starting point to examine the potential added value of cultural diversity in childcare.

1.1. Cultural diversity and teaching beliefs

Numerous studies have shown that the cultural childrearing belief systems of parents and teachers, as well as corresponding childrearing and teaching practices, differ between cultural communities (Harkness & Super, 1996; Greenfield et al., 2008; Rubin & Chung, 2006). In these studies, a distinction is often made between Western, independency-focused belief systems and non-Western belief systems that stress interdependency and social intelligence. Whereas European-American or Western-European caregivers were found to stress independence and individual agency (Keller, 2007; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, & Gloria Garcia, 2009), Latino-American and West-African caregivers were found to emphasize interdependence and group membership (Harwood, Schölermerich, & Schulze, 2000; Nsamenang, 2006). Furthermore, a focus on interdependence in non-Western cultures is often displayed in the emphasis on developmental goals such as learning from peers, collaborative play, and social intelligence (Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Nsamenang, 2006; Rogoff, Paradise, Mejía Arauz, Correa-Chavéz, & Angelillo, 2003; Serpell, 2011; Super, Harkness, Barry, & Zeitlin, 2011; Tobin, 2005).

Studies into the cultural beliefs of teachers in childcare with a non-Western cultural background are rare (Huijbregts, Leseman, & Tavecchio, 2008; Huijbregts et al., 2009). A study in the field of preschool education for 3- to 6-year-olds, however, confirms the pattern found with parents. In this study, Killen, Ardilla-Rey, Barrakatz, and Wang (2000) found that preschool teachers in Colombia and El Salvador, living in predominantly sociocentric cultures, stressed the importance of group experiences in preschool more than their counterparts in the predominantly independence-focused cultures of the U.S. and Taiwan.

The current study compares group-focused beliefs and behavior of teachers with a native Dutch and immigrant Moroccan-Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, Antillean-Dutch, and Surinamese-Dutch background in center-based childcare in the Netherlands and examines the effects of different beliefs on practice, focusing on the way teachers support group processes. The Surinamese, Antilleans, Turkish, and Moroccans are the biggest cultural minority groups in the Netherlands (Merens, Van den Brakel, Hartgers, & Hermans, 2011). Studies among parents showed that child-rearing beliefs differed strongly between these cultural groups. As opposed to the Dutch emphasis on independence and autonomy as an important socialization goal, parents with a Surinamese or Antillean background emphasized respect for authorities, obedience to parents, and relatedness. Likewise, the Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch parents found respect for authorities, conformity to rules and relational values important as socialization goals (Dekovic, Pels, & Model, 2006; Janssens, Pels, Dekovic, and Nijsten, 1999). To what extent teachers from these cultural communities working in center-based childcare have similar views on childrearing and socialization, and how this influences teaching practice in childcare and especially support of group processes, is as yet unknown.

1.2. Group processes and child development

Peer interactions are essential for the development of social competence, especially in early childhood. Starting with babies' and toddlers' mutual eye gaze and responding to each other's

distress, children learn how to reciprocate action and eventually how to play together, help each other, and learn from each other (Eckerman & Whitehead, 1999; Howes & Matheson, 1992; Verba, 1998; Williams, Mastergeorge, & Ontai, 2010). In addition to promoting social competence, playing together and building upon each other's ideas and actions also enable children to perform at a higher cognitive level (Henry & Rickman, 2007; Rogoff, 1998; Wishard et al., 2003). Through the mechanisms of negotiating sociocognitive conflicts and co-construction of knowledge, collaborative group activities are considered important vehicles of cognitive development (Leseman, Rollenberg, & Rispen, 2001; Rogoff, 1998, 2003). A recent review by Diamond and Lee (2011) points to the beneficial effects of social play, collaborative work, learning in groups and child-to-child teaching on the development of cognitive and emotional control functions.

Despite broad consensus on the importance of peer interactions for child development, current quality measures focus mostly on (dyadic) teacher-child interactions and the overall classroom climate, with little or no specific attention to the quality of group processes and the role of the teacher in promoting group processes (Ahnert et al., 2006; Burchinal, 2010). The few studies to date that did focus on group processes and collaborative play in childcare settings found initial evidence for a positive effect of group processes on child well-being and development. For example, Howes and Matheson (1992) found that complex peer play was a strong indicator of social competence. In a later study, Howes and Smith (1995) found that children's cognitive activity was enhanced when teachers initiated and supported positive social interactions between children. Furthermore, in a meta-analysis, Ahnert et al. (2006) found that children's secure attachment to teachers in center-based care did not depend on the sensitivity of teachers in dyadic interactions with the individual child, but on the teachers' sensitivity to the whole group. In addition, in a Dutch childcare study, failing group management was found to increase negativity in peer interactions and to be a major cause of children's low well-being (Gevers Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2006). Finally, teachers' strategies to guide peer interactions and experiences were found to be crucial to children's competence in peer relationships (Howes et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2010). In summary, these findings point to the importance of teachers' support of group processes for children's social and cognitive development.

1.3. The current study

The current study examined the relation between the cultural background of teachers and their beliefs and practices in early childcare, with a specific focus on group processes. Teachers of native Dutch and immigrant Turkish-Dutch, Moroccan-Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch, and Antillean-Dutch backgrounds working in non-familial childcare centers for 0- to 4-year-old children were interviewed about their cultural childrearing beliefs and socialization goals and observed in working with groups of children in center-based childcare. For methodological reasons, to reduce the number of parameters to be estimated in the statistical analyses, a distinction was made between Surinamese-Dutch and Antillean-Dutch teachers on the one hand, and on the other hand, the Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch teachers. Surinam and the former Dutch Antilles are located in the Caribbean region in South-America. They share a colonial history of more than 300 years of exposure to the Dutch language, culture and school system, and have a smaller cultural distance to the Dutch society than immigrants from Morocco and Turkey. Morocco and Turkey can be characterized as Islamic Mediterranean cultures. The Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch migrated to the Netherlands since the 1960s after being recruited for cheap labor and had no prior contact

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