



The nature and extent of change in early childhood educators' language and literacy knowledge and beliefs

Jennifer R. Ottley ^{a, d, *}, Shayne B. Piasta ^{a, b}, Susan A. Mauck ^c, Ann O'Connell ^c,
Melissa Weber-Mayrer ^b, Laura M. Justice ^a

^a Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy, The Ohio State University, USA

^b Department of Teaching and Learning, The Ohio State University, USA

^c Department of Educational Studies, The Ohio State University, USA

^d Department of Teacher Education, Ohio University, USA

H I G H L I G H T S

- We examine early childhood educators' change in literacy knowledge and beliefs.
- Educators made small growth the year that professional development was provided.
- Educators' growth plateaued into the subsequent school year.
- Educators' openness to change predicted their outcomes in literacy knowledge.
- Educators' level of self-efficacy predicted their outcomes in literacy beliefs.

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Professional development (PD) can enhance educators' knowledge and beliefs, but research has yet to determine the nature and extent of such change. This study examined the patterns and predictors of change in knowledge and beliefs for early childhood educators participating in state-implemented PD. Results from a longitudinal piecewise growth model indicated that educators improved their knowledge and beliefs to varying extents during the school year when PD was provided. Change then plateaued with educators neither improving nor regressing during the subsequent school year. Openness to change and self-efficacy significantly predicted knowledge and beliefs, respectively. Research and practice implications are provided.

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The delivery of effective language and literacy instruction is associated with the language and literacy knowledge and beliefs possessed by educators (Dickinson & Brady, 2006; Piasta, Connor, Fishman, & Morrison, 2009). Professional development (PD) projects in the United States and other countries have demonstrated that early childhood (EC) educators have the potential to develop their language and literacy knowledge and beliefs (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009; Hamre et al., 2012; Wood & Bennett, 2000). Yet, we have much to learn about educator change as a

result of large-scale PD efforts, such as those offered by states or required by recent initiatives (e.g., federal Early Learning Challenge grants in the U.S.). Although many large-scale efforts to date have demonstrated positive impacts on EC educators' knowledge and beliefs, others have not been entirely successful (LeMoine, 2008; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Moreover, extant evidence (Ciyer, Nagasawa, Swadener, & Patet, 2010; Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010) and adult learning theory (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) lead to hypotheses suggesting that change may be differential among educators and that such change may be related to measurable factors such as educators' initial knowledge and beliefs, self-efficacy, and openness to change. For these reasons, we were interested in examining growth in the knowledge and beliefs of EC educators participating in a large state-funded PD

* Corresponding author. Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy, 175 East Seventh Avenue, Columbus, OH 43201, USA.

E-mail addresses: ottley.2@osu.edu, ottley@ohio.edu (J.R. Ottley).

program and determining factors associated with such change over time. Specifically, we examined the nature and extent of growth in language and literacy knowledge and beliefs over an 18-month period and whether such growth was predicted by educators' initial knowledge and beliefs, self-efficacy, and openness to change.

1. EC educators' language and literacy knowledge and beliefs

Language and literacy knowledge refers to educators' understanding of the core early literacy components (e.g., oral language, phonemic awareness). Some research indicates that EC educators' levels of language and literacy knowledge are lower than anticipated (Cunningham et al., 2009) and that variation exists among educators in their knowledge (Crim et al., 2008; Hindman & Wasik, 2011). For example, when the literacy-related knowledge of a heterogeneous group of EC educators was assessed using the *Informal Survey of Linguistic Knowledge* (Moats, 1994), between 40% and 85% of educators provided incorrect responses for items assessing phonemic awareness (Crim et al., 2008). Such knowledge is crucial for educators because research suggests that it may influence children's emergent literacy growth (e.g., Poshajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009). Further, EC educators providing instruction in Head Start centers have demonstrated more knowledge about some components of language and literacy (e.g., oral language; Hindman & Wasik, 2011) compared with others (e.g., phonemic awareness; Hindman & Wasik, 2011). Collectively, these results indicate that great variability exists among EC educators with respect to their language and literacy knowledge and that some EC educators are lacking basic knowledge relevant for providing meaningful literacy learning opportunities to young children.

Language and literacy beliefs refers to what educators "assume, think, and know about how young children develop literacy skills; what they perceive a teacher's role in the process to be; and how they feel they should implement these practices in a classroom" (Hindman & Wasik, 2011, p. 480). Similar to the literature on educators' literacy-related knowledge, EC educators in the United States and abroad have varying beliefs about language and literacy instruction and how children's emergent literacy develops (e.g., Lynch, 2009; O'Leary, Cockburn, Powell, & Diamond, 2010). Additionally, many Head Start educators have been found to hold similar language and literacy beliefs with regard to certain literacy practices (e.g., book reading; Hindman & Wasik, 2011), but they maintain dissimilar beliefs about other literacy-related practices (e.g., writing; Hindman & Wasik, 2011). Unfortunately, some beliefs held by EC educators are misaligned with research and theory in emergent literacy development (Hindman & Wasik, 2011; Powell, Diamond, Bojczyk, & Gerde, 2008). For example, in Powell and colleagues' (2008) study, many of the participating Head Start educators indicated that children needed to be "ready" to engage with literacy materials before literacy development could occur – a belief contrary to the tenets of emergent literacy theory (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). It is critical that EC educators possess literacy-related beliefs that are aligned with research and theory, because these beliefs are positively related to the learning opportunities provided to children (e.g., Meehan, 2007; Ure & Raban, 2001). Therefore, to enhance the literacy-related learning opportunities experienced by children, EC educators may need support to more closely align their language and literacy beliefs with that of current research and theory.

Many researchers have argued that language and literacy PD is necessary to enhance educators' literacy-related knowledge and beliefs, thereby better supporting the use of research-aligned practices and, ultimately, children's emergent literacy development (Crim et al., 2008; Lee & Ginsburg, 2007; Neuman & Wright,

2010; Phillips & Morse, 2011; Piasta, Justice, McGinty, & Kaderavek, 2012). Whereas some research has demonstrated that language and literacy PD can have positive impacts on EC educators' knowledge and beliefs (Hamre et al., 2012; Hindman & Wasik, 2011; Scott-Little et al., 2011), other research studies have shown limited improvement on such outcomes (Breffini, 2011; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). Moreover, even within studies showing positive impacts of PD, change does not occur on a consistent basis for all educators (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer Hamre, & Justice, 2008). For example, Neuman and Cunningham (2009) found that EC educators varied in their knowledge and practices, with educators in center-based settings having greater literacy-related knowledge and practices than educators in home-based settings at pre-test. Further, when assessing change over time, home-based educators demonstrated significantly greater change in their practices than center-based educators. Subsequently, many scholars (e.g., Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Piasta et al., 2010; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009; Snyder, Hemmeter, & McLaughlin, 2011) have argued that additional research is warranted to identify under what conditions, and for whom, PD opportunities are associated with change.

1.1. Factors contributing to educator change

In the current study, we focused not only on the extent to which EC educators participating in a large, state-funded PD changed their language and literacy knowledge and beliefs, but also for whom and under what conditions such changes occurred. We examined three factors hypothesized to relate to educators' change in knowledge and beliefs: self-efficacy, openness to change, and initial knowledge/beliefs. These three factors were selected not only based on research and theory, as described below, but because each represents a potentially malleable factor or additional target of PD that could result in more positive PD outcomes. Although the research described below does not provide a comprehensive summary of the predictors selected, it offers a focused selection of research that have direct application to the content of this paper. For more thorough summaries of the research on these topics, see Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) or Usher and Pajares (2008) for self-efficacy, Meyer (2013) for openness to change, and Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) for relations between initial status and growth. Notably, researchers have yet to directly examine how these factors are associated with educator change in language and literacy knowledge and beliefs.

1.1.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' perceived confidence in their own abilities to produce specific outcomes (Bandura, 1997) and is an important belief related to educators' effectiveness in acquiring new instructional skills, using instructional practices in the classroom, and achieving positive child outcomes (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Guskey, 1988; Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2013; Overbaugh & Lu, 2008; Pajares, 1992; Stein & Wang, 1988). Educators' levels of self-efficacy can vary based on the content they are teaching (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996) and may change after applying knowledge gained through PD opportunities (Ross, 1994). Educators who feel more efficacious tend to have higher levels of participation in PD (Geijsel, Slegers, Stoel, & Krüger, 2009), which in turn, may predict their outcomes (Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011; Domitrovich, Gest, Gill, Jones, & DeRousie, 2009). Notably, educators' level of self-efficacy is also related to their openness to change and use of new practices (Guskey, 1988; Smylie, 1988); yet, research is warranted to determine whether self-efficacy specifically predicts educators' change

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