



## Child-centred educational practice in different early education settings: Associations with professionals' attitudes, self-efficacy, and professional background

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### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated whether teacher beliefs (self-efficacy and attitudes) mediate the impact of professional background on child-centred educational practice. We specifically investigated whether teacher beliefs related to self (self-efficacy) are a stronger predictor of educational practice than teacher beliefs related to teaching approach (attitudes). A total of 265 professionals from different early education and care settings (i.e., centre-based daycare, family-based daycare, and educational playgroups) in Switzerland participated in the study. A self-report questionnaire was developed to assess professionals' self-efficacy, attitudes and educational practice in terms of child-centredness. The results confirm the factorial validity of the questionnaire. Self-efficacy positively predicted educational practice, while professionals' attitudes were not associated with educational practice. Further, the positive effect of domain-specific knowledge on educational practice was mediated by self-efficacy. Finally, family daycare providers reported lower self-efficacy and lower levels of child-centred educational practice than other professionals. The present study emphasises the role of professionals' self-efficacy in the context of delivering high-quality childcare and child-centred education in early childhood. The results suggest that promoting knowledge of teaching approaches may be a promising way to promote early childhood educators' child-centred educational practice through increasing their self-efficacy.

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Effective early childhood education is thought to promote children's learning and development and also to contribute to children's mental health. Child-centred educational practices are characterised by an understanding of effective promotion of children's learning and development considering children's individual needs and developmental level (Copple & Bredekamp, 2010). Child-centred teaching practices also indicate high process quality in early education and care, for example through a strong consideration of child perspectives or a high quality of feedback in response to what children do or say (La Paro, Hamre, & Pianta, 2012). Professional development (through education, certification or training) is considered to be an important factor in fostering developmen-

tally appropriate educational practices in early education settings (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). One of the mechanisms through which professional level and experience may have an impact on educational practice is through teacher beliefs (Fives & Buehl, 2012). The current study aims to investigate whether teacher beliefs (self-efficacy and attitudes) mediate the impact of professional background on educational practice in different educational and care settings in Switzerland.

### 1. Early education and care in Switzerland

In German-speaking Switzerland, early education and care for children aged under four years takes place in different types of care settings: centre-based daycare, family-based daycare, and educational playgroups (Perren, Frei, & Herrmann, 2016). At four years old, most children will transition to mandatory kindergarten, which is a well-established part of the Swiss school system with structures and teachers' professional level paralleling the school system.

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In contrast, early childhood education and care lacks such clear structures and caregivers and educators have heterogeneous professional levels.

### 1.1. Centre-based daycare

Daycare centres are institutions which are open full-time on all five weekdays and provide daycare for children from infancy up to about four years of age (Stamm, 2009). In contrast to other countries, in Switzerland most children attend daycare only part-time, generally 2–3 days per week (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2014). Due to recent developments within the field and a new emphasis on daycare quality, daycare centres are now also understood as important educational institutions that foster children's learning and development. However, only a minority of children attends centre-based daycare.

Professional caregivers in centre-based daycare most often complete an apprenticeship. This is a dual vocational training of three years, which comprises two-day school attendance and three-day in-service training per week. Professional caregivers only rarely have a college or university degree. In daycare centres, a high percentage of trainees (i.e., young persons who attend a first year-long internship after completion of mandatory school) and apprentices work alongside trained professional caregivers (Stamm, 2009).

### 1.2. Family-based daycare

As in many other countries, family daycare is provided by individual caregivers in their own homes. As family daycare offers flexible daycare arrangements, many parents choose this form of daycare. Family daycare providers are often self-employed workers, but they are frequently affiliated to a network of childcare workers or an association of daycare homes. Most daycare home associations expect some basic training before they will engage staff. The minimum requirement is 18 h of training and a six-hour first aid course for small children, plus at least three hours of further training per year. Apart from these recommendations, no formal requirements exist. Thus, the professional backgrounds of family daycare providers are very heterogeneous (Stamm, 2009).

### 1.3. Educational playgroups

Many children aged between three and four years attend an educational playgroup one to three times a week for about two to four hours at a time. Unlike other daycare institutions, educational playgroups primarily have educational aims and do not aim to provide daycare for the children of working parents (Stamm, 2009). There is no formally or nationally acknowledged education or certification procedure, and there are no official requirements for the educational level or training of playgroup educators either (i.e., any individual can open a playgroup). However, the Swiss Association of Playgroup Educators (Schweizerischer Spielgruppen-Leiterinnen-Verband, [www.sslv.ch](http://www.sslv.ch)) has drawn up standardised guidelines ([www.sslv.ch](http://www.sslv.ch)) to promote a certain level of quality. Passing basic training of 80–100 h qualifies a person to organise and start an educational playgroup. However, this training is not mandatory. Thus, the professional background and general education level of playgroup teachers is very heterogeneous (Stamm, 2009).

### 1.4. Child-centred educational practice in Switzerland

As indicated above, the educational level of early childhood professionals for zero- to four-year-old children in Switzerland is quite low (Stamm, 2009). Different stakeholders have initiated a series of activities for professional development in recent years. One of these activities were to draw up a central reference document that aims

to enhance professionals' knowledge of child-centred educational practice (Orientierungsrahmen; Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2012). The *Orientierungsrahmen* can be freely downloaded from [www.orientierungsrahmen.ch](http://www.orientierungsrahmen.ch) and is meant to enhance child-centred educational practice in different care and educational settings. Its foundation is a relationship-focused approach that favours strongly child-centred education. In line with this reference document, we understand child-centred practice as an educational practice that allows children autonomously – supported when necessary – to explore their environment, to build and consolidate their competences, to benefit from various and stimulating learning opportunities, and to be valued and respected as members of the community. The *Orientierungsrahmen* is currently being used in the field to promote professional development through dissemination of the document itself, related publications, round table discussion, specific training opportunities, workshops, conferences, and a website with demonstration videos ([www.kinder-4.ch](http://www.kinder-4.ch)).

## 2. Professional background and educational practice and teacher beliefs

In the current study, the term professional background includes both professional level (i.e., training in early childhood education, acquisition of domain-specific knowledge, and formal educational level) and professional experience. Associations between these different aspects of professional background and educational practice and teacher beliefs have been examined in a number of studies.

### 2.1. Educational practice

Findings about the effect of early childhood educators' training on their educational practice are rather complex. Training, such as workshops or professional meetings, is understood as professional development that does not confer credits for a higher educational degree. In their meta-analysis of the relevant research studies on the topic, Fukkink and Lont (2007) found a positive association between childcare workers' participation in training and higher programme quality or more sensitive interactions with children. Although training in general may increase the quality of educational practice, the effects differ according to some features of the training. In particular, training was more effective if it was continuous or renewed intermittently, was sequential, and followed a fixed curriculum.

Formal educational attainment of early childhood educators is commonly measured by years of education, by the highest degree obtained, and by holding a degree in related fields of early childhood education. Some studies found positive associations between formal education and higher observed quality of educational practice in preschool classrooms (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2005). However, other studies found no consistent association (Early et al., 2007). The review by Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, and Lavelle (2010) identified individualised professional development as a promising but not completely confirmed approach to improving educational practice. The most effective approaches aim to enhance professionals' knowledge through theoretical coursework, combined with individualised training in interaction skills (caregiver-child) and feedback on such skills (Zaslow et al., 2010).

Professional experience is also an important part of professional background. For example, a study of preschool children showed that years of educators' professional experience is positively associated with observed emotional and instructional support (Jeon, Buettner, & Hur, 2015). In summary, professional background (i.e., higher education or training, or more professional experience) may have a positive impact on educational practice.

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