



Teachers' dispositional mindfulness and the quality of their relationships with children in Head Start classrooms



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ABSTRACT

The quality of teachers' relationships with children is a key predictor of children's later social emotional competence and academic achievement. Interventions to increase mindfulness among teachers have focused primarily on the impacts on teachers' subjective well-being, but not on the quality of their relationships with children. Furthermore, none of these interventions have involved preschool teachers. To consider the potential of mindfulness-based interventions to improve the quality of teachers' relationships with preschool-aged children, we examined data from an online survey of 1001 classroom teachers in 37 Pennsylvania Head Start Programs. Using path analysis we investigated the association between teachers' dispositional mindfulness and the quality of their relationships with children (conflict and closeness). We further examined whether this association was mediated by teacher depressive symptoms and moderated by perceived workplace stress. Higher levels of dispositional mindfulness among teachers were associated with higher quality relationships with children (less conflict and greater closeness). The association between greater dispositional mindfulness and less conflict was partially mediated by lower depressive symptoms, and the conditional direct effect of mindfulness on conflict was stronger when perceived workplace stress was lower. These findings suggest that preschool teachers who have higher levels of dispositional mindfulness may experience higher quality relationships with children in their classrooms. Interventions to increase levels of dispositional mindfulness among early childhood educators may improve their well-being along with the quality of their relationships with children, potentially impacting children's educational outcomes. The potential impacts of such interventions may be even stronger if structural and systemic changes are also made to reduce workplace stress.

1. Introduction

The quality of relationships between teachers and children in early childhood programs is a key predictor of children's social-emotional competence and academic achievement (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Raver, Blair, & Li-Grining, 2012). Teacher-child relationship quality may have a greater influence on child outcomes than commonly assessed teacher attributes, such as education level (Early et al., 2006; Early et al., 2007). To establish high-quality relationships with children, teachers must be knowledgeable

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about children's developmental levels, attuned to children's signals and needs, cognizant of cultural and familial context, and intentionally provide a comfortable, emotionally safe environment for children's learning – all in the context of offering rigorous assessment and instruction. As this is no easy task, early childhood teachers who are able to establish and maintain high-quality relationships with children, are themselves socially and emotionally competent adults (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). They have high levels of self- and social-awareness, regulate their behavior and emotions, and are intentional in their interactions with children.

In Head Start, a federally-funded comprehensive early childhood education program for low-income preschoolers (Head Start Services, n.d.), teachers often work with children whose families face stressful social circumstances, such as homelessness, single-parent households, and limited income, education, and literacy (Aikens et al., 2010; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Children's stressors at home can contribute to poor self-regulation, emotional difficulties, and disruptive classroom behaviors that interfere with learning and place high demands on teachers (Blair, 2002; McClelland et al., 2007; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). High-quality teacher-child relationships are particularly important for children from these low-income families (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), but such relationships require teachers' to maintain high levels of emotion regulation and well-being.

The quality of teachers' relationships with children can be characterized on a continuum of closeness and conflict (Pianta, 1994). Close teacher-child relationships are characterized by warm, reciprocal interactions, with the child turning to the teacher for comfort in times of distress. On the other hand, relationships that are high in conflict are characterized by struggle, frequent anger, and frustrated interactions. High-quality teacher-child relationships (low in conflict and high in closeness) have been consistently associated with children's social-emotional competence and academic performance, both of which are key aspects of school readiness (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Denham et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Raver et al., 2012; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). In the context of Head Start, there is limited research on modifiable factors that may improve teacher-child relationships. For example, Banking Time, an intervention implemented among Head Start teachers to improve teacher-child relationships through one-on-one time with child-led play, has demonstrated positive impacts on teacher-child relationships (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). However, due to the intensity of the intervention, it may be costly to implement on a large scale. Therefore, it is important to consider what other supports might assist Head Start teachers in developing positive relationships with children.

One promising approach to supporting Head Start teachers' relationships with children is to cultivate dispositional mindfulness among the teachers (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Teachers who are more mindful in daily life may experience more positive relationships with the children in their classroom, but we are not aware of any studies that evaluate the association between dispositional mindfulness and the quality of teacher-child relationships in early childhood education. Much of the research investigating improved mindfulness skills among teachers has focused primarily on the impacts on teachers' subjective well-being and has not been conducted in early childhood education settings, such as Head Start (Benn, Akiva, Arel, & Roeser, 2012; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Gold et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2017; Lomas, Medina, Ivztan, Rupprecht, & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012; Roeser et al., 2013).

There are several mechanisms by which dispositional mindfulness may improve the quality of teacher's relationship with preschool children. Mindfulness is defined by Kabat-Zinn (2003) as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment” (p. 145). Individuals who are mindful tend to exhibit steady attention and notice and accept their thoughts, feelings and reactions to physical stimuli, including their own internal bodily sensations (Khanna & Greeson, 2013). The ability to be present and aware of one's thoughts and feelings, while suspending judgment, can improve self-regulation and reduce reactivity (Hölzel et al., 2011; Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

Mindfulness has been linked to better relationship quality through improved interpersonal communication and the ability to be supportive to others in distress (Bihari & Mullan, 2014; Brown & Kasser, 2005), as in situations teachers frequently encounter when interacting with preschoolers. Participants in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which is designed to improve the mindfulness skills of awareness and non-judgment, have reported less reactivity and a calmer demeanor toward negative external stimuli. In interpersonal relations, this results in a greater ability to avoid arguments with others and focus on conveying an understanding of others' perspectives and needs rather than trying to immediately remedy others' problems (Bihari & Mullan, 2014).

Mindfulness may help teachers to approach stressful classroom environments and children's challenging behavior with more awareness, acceptance, and emotion regulation. Being aware and accepting of emotions in self and others when appraising stressful situations may help teachers respond to these situations with calm intentionality, being proactive rather than reactive. Teachers who are more mindful may also have more empathy for children (Bihari & Mullan, 2014; Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007) and show more compassion toward them (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011). Teachers with greater levels of dispositional mindfulness may also have greater relational capacities through improved emotion regulation, which may enable them to react in more constructive ways to disruptive classroom behaviors by understanding children's needs and perspectives, resulting in a less conflicted and more positive teacher-child relationships (Schussler et al., 2016).

Early childhood educators must themselves be well to establish warm, productive relationships with children and families. The strong association between poor mental health in adult caregivers and troubled interpersonal relationships with children has been established in the context of parenting (Campbell et al., 2004; Goodman et al., 2011; National Institute of Child, 1999) and early childhood education (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Pakarinen et al., 2010; Paro et al., 2009). Early childhood teachers who report depressive symptoms are more likely to demonstrate less sensitivity and greater withdrawal in their interactions with children (Gerber et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Jeon, Buettner, & Snyder, 2014). Furthermore, teachers with depressive symptoms report higher conflict in their relationships with children (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008) and

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