



Elementary preservice teachers' attitudes and pedagogical strategies toward hypothetical shy, exuberant, and average children



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ABSTRACT

Children's learning and development are directly and indirectly influenced by teachers' beliefs and pedagogical strategies toward child behaviors. This cross-sectional study explored elementary preservice teachers' attitudes and pedagogical strategies for working with hypothetical children demonstrating temperament-based shy, exuberant, and average behaviors in the classroom. A secondary goal was to compare attitudes and pedagogical strategies at the beginning and end of teacher training program. A total of 354 participants responded to three vignettes describing children frequently displaying these behaviors. Results indicated preservice teachers were more likely to use social-learning strategies with shy children and high-powered strategies with exuberant children. Participants were more likely to show warmth to shy children, but believed they would be less academically successful. Participants at the end of the program reported higher self-efficacy and more warmth toward all children compared to those beginning the program. Results are discussed in terms of their educational implications.

1. Introduction

A primary goal of elementary teacher education is to prepare preservice teachers to work effectively with diverse children in the classroom. Preservice teachers are undergraduate students who seek to become teachers through formal teacher education programs, where they experience a combination of content courses, pedagogy courses, and field experience. Teachers' attitudes and pedagogical strategies to support or discourage specific child behaviors directly and indirectly influence children's developmental outcomes. For instance, teacher beliefs about child development influence their responses to children's behaviors (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Cunningham & Sugawara, 1989), classroom practices (Fang, 1996; Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, & Meter, 2012; Vartuli, 1999; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011), and relationships with children (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Thijs, Koomen, & Van Der Leij, 2008). Teacher beliefs about children's behaviors also contribute to children's relationships with peers, self-

regulation, school adjustment, and academic performance (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Teachers need to understand the complexity of child development to make pedagogical decisions in light of student needs and to support different social, emotional, and cognitive developmental pathways (Horowitz et al., 2005; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). In this study, we focused on one such pathway—elementary preservice teachers' understanding of and response to individual differences in child temperament. Specifically, this cross-sectional study examined preservice teachers' attitudes (i.e., teacher warmth, teacher self-efficacy, and teacher-perceived child academic skills) and pedagogical strategies (i.e., high-powered strategies vs. social-learning strategies) toward hypothetical children displaying shy (i.e., inhibited and low-reactive, quiet), exuberant (i.e., uninhibited and high-reactive, overly talkative), or average (i.e., not inhibited/shy or uninhibited/exuberant, typical) behaviors in the classroom (e.g., Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Coplan, Hastings, Lagacé-Séguin, & Moulton, 2002; Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor,

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2011; Fox, Henderson, Rubin, Calkins, & Schmidt, 2001; Hastings & Rubin, 1999; Kagan, 2012; Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). A secondary goal was to see how these attitudes and pedagogical strategies differed between preservice teachers at the beginning compared to the end of their training program.

There is limited research on preservice teachers' attitudes and pedagogical strategies toward children with different temperament-based behaviors. The only empirical studies on this topic have focused on inservice teachers (e.g., Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Coplan et al., 2011). We need to understand whether preservice teachers respond to students in developmentally supportive ways to inform teacher education. Teacher attitudes and pedagogical strategies are influenced by earlier life experiences and professional training, including content and pedagogical courses as well as internships (Keys, 2007; Pajares, 1992). Thus, this study can potentially inform elementary teacher preparation and professional development by focusing on preservice teachers' understanding of temperamental differences among children in order to promote success for both teachers and students. To examine preservice teachers' attitudes and pedagogical strategies, we presented three hypothetical vignettes (Coplan et al., 2011) describing elementary school boys who display shyness, exuberance, or average behaviors in the classroom (see Appendix). Following each vignette, participants rated their attitudes and the likelihood of using various pedagogical strategies working with children displaying these behaviors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Child temperament-based behavior style

Children vary in the ways in which they behave in classroom environments, engage in class activities, follow directions, and interact with peers and teachers. These differences are based in part on children's temperament, defined as biologically based individual differences in reactivity and regulation in responses to novel stimuli (e.g., people, events) in the environment (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Behavioral inhibition as a temperament construct refers to “a behavioral profile in children that is observed soon after the first birthday and is marked by avoidance and timidity in response to unfamiliar people, events, and objects” (Kagan, 2012, p.79). Specifically, individuals differ in their thresholds of arousal; those who have a low threshold are very easily aroused, and are highly reactive. Research evidence suggests that highly reactive individuals have very easily excited amygdalas that tend to “overreact to unexpected or unfamiliar events” (Kagan, 2012, p. 71). Such high-reactive individuals are more likely to display inhibited, shy behaviors, such as avoiding eye contact and engaging in limited or quiet speech in social situations (Kagan, 2012; Kalutskaya, Archbell, Moritz Rudasill, & Coplan, 2015). On the other hand, low-reactive individuals have a high threshold for arousal. Low-reactive individuals are uninhibited and exuberant; they do not display social fear and tend to engage in spontaneous speech with unfamiliar people (Kagan & Fox, 2006). Many children are neither shy nor exuberant. Approximately 15–20% of the population is highly reactive or shy, 30–35% is low-reactive or exuberant, and 45–55% is moderately reactive or average (Kagan, Snidman, & Arcus, 1998). The complexity of child temperament has important implications for children's behaviors and engagement in the classroom environment.

The environments of typical elementary classrooms require children to respond and adapt to multiple social (e.g., work with peers), academic (e.g., focus on an assignment), and behavioral (e.g., sit still during teacher-directed instruction) demands (Carter & Doyle, 2006). Children's temperament characteristics may account for their inappropriate, excessive, and/or unexpected responses to the school environment (e.g., Thomas & Chess, 1977). Shy and exuberant behavior has significant implications for children's abilities to optimally engage in the elementary classroom (Kagan et al., 1998). Because shy children tend to withdraw from novel stimuli (e.g., a new teacher) and social

situations (e.g., initiating interactions with peers) (Coplan & Rubin, 2010), they may have limited opportunities to interact and engage with teachers and peers in the classroom (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006). On the other hand, a very exuberant child is more likely to approach novel and social situations, but is also prone to engage in behavior that is disruptive to classroom activities such as calling out answers or interrupting teacher instruction (Rimm-Kaufman & Kagan, 2005). Shy and exuberant children display behaviors that can be considered poorly regulated because such children cannot flexibly adapt their behaviors to match the situational demands (Eisenberg, Shepard, Fabes, Murphy, & Guthrie, 1998; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). That is, the shy child is *over-regulated* and the exuberant child is *under-regulated*, and both types of children require support from adults to manage their behavior in ways that allow them to obtain maximum benefit from experiences in school.

2.2. Teacher attitudes

2.2.1. Teacher warmth

Research on student perceptions has shown that students tend to appreciate warm and sympathetic teachers who establish caring relationships with their students (Mainhard, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2011). Teachers' warmth and support is positively associated with students' sense of belonging and engagement (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007), inversely associated with student tension (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004), and can be a protective factor for students' academic success, particularly for those who exhibit behavioral (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2005) or temperamental (e.g., Curby, Rudasill, Edwards, & Pérez-Edgar, 2011) risk. For example, Hamre and Pianta (2005) found that first grade children at risk for academic difficulties because of poor attention and behavior performed just as well on standardized tests of academic performance as their peers with no risk when they were in classrooms marked by high levels of teacher warmth and sensitivity. In a longitudinal study, Hamre and Pianta (2001) reported that relational negativity with teachers in kindergarten was associated with diminished academic and emotional outcomes as late as 8th grade. Similarly, Arbeau, Coplan, and Weeks (2010) found that associations between 1st grade children's shyness (at the beginning of the school year) and socio-emotional adjustment (at the end of the school year) were moderated by teacher-child relationships, with shyness and negative teacher-child relationships (i.e., dependent, conflictual) related to social-emotional difficulties, whereas close teacher-child relationships (i.e., warm, supportive) related to positive adjustment. Arbeau et al. (2010) further suggested a protective role (i.e., buffering process) for close teacher-child relationships in shy children's socio-emotional adjustment. In general, teachers' warmth and sympathetic attitudes contribute to a positive classroom social climate (Woolfolk-Hoy & Weinstein, 2006), help children successfully adjust to school (Arbeau et al., 2010), and enhance student academic interest (Hidi, 2006) and subsequent positive academic outcomes. Teacher warmth serves a protective role in shy children's socio-emotional adjustment (Arbeau et al., 2010).

2.2.2. Teacher self-efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy has been studied extensively in educational research (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). According to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, self-efficacy beliefs refer to “people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute the courses of academic action required to accomplish academic tasks” (p. 391). Individuals form their self-efficacy beliefs by interpreting information mainly from four sources, including mastery experience (i.e., previous attainments or performance), vicarious experience (i.e., observation of others performing tasks), social persuasion (i.e., verbal judgments provided by others), and physiological and emotional states (e.g., anxiety, stress, arousal, and mood states) (Bandura, 1986, 1997). The most influential source is the interpreted result of one's mastery

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