



Does professional development reduce the influence of teacher stress on teacher–child interactions in pre-kindergarten classrooms?☆



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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the extent to which participation in a 14-week professional development course designed to improve teacher–child interactions in the classroom moderated the relation between teacher-reported job stress and gains in observed teacher–child interaction quality from the beginning to the end of the intervention. Participants were preschool teachers ($N = 427$; M age = 42) with an average of 11 years of experience teaching. Teachers reported how intensely they experienced different sources of stress at pre-test only (i.e., prior to being randomized into the treatment condition [course or control]). Teacher–child interactions were measured through classroom observations at pre and post intervention. Results demonstrated that control teachers reporting higher professional investment stress showed fewer gains in observed emotional support relative to control teachers experiencing less professional investment stress. These findings were not evident for teachers in the course condition. Interestingly, teachers with higher professional investment stress showed fewer gains in instructional support in the control condition and greater gains in the course condition, relative to teachers in their respective treatment groups who reported lower levels of professional investment stress. Findings suggest that participation in the professional development intervention had a buffering effect on the negative association between professional investment stress and emotional support. With regard to instructional support, it is possible that teachers' heightened awareness and anxiety over their need to develop professionally may have made them more responsive to an intervention designed to improve practice.

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1. Introduction

Children's experiences in early learning environments are critical for developmental outcomes. A growing body of research on preschool settings indicates that high quality interactions between teachers and students foster children's academic and social-emotional readiness skills (Burchinal, Zaslow, & Tarullo, 2016; Raver et al., 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). At the same time, literature reports that teachers' experience with stress can

reduce the quality of these important interactions with students (Li-Grining et al., 2010; Yoon, 2002). As a result, many educational researchers have expended great effort to try to better understand teacher stress and identify ways in which teachers can be supported so that stress does not take a toll on their instruction and interactions (e.g., Chang, 2009; Kyriacou, 2001; Lambert, O'Donnell, Kusherman, & McCarthy, 2006; Zhai, Raver, & Li-Grining, 2011).

This study draws from Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) model of a *prosocial classroom*, which advances the importance of teacher emotional well-being. The model describes the impact of stress as a "burnout cascade" (p. 492). Stressed teachers without the emotional resources to meet the challenges of teaching have poorer quality interactions with their students. Consequently, students spend more time off task and show more problem behaviors, which in turn, produce a more stressful classroom climate. The stressful classroom climate leads to more challenge, stress, and exhaustion for the teacher and the cascade continues. Jennings and Greenberg indicate that in-service professional development may be one

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way to ameliorate feelings of job stress and boost the quality of teacher–child relationships. Yet, professional development opportunities take time, increase workload, and could even result in more feelings of stress and burnout, rather than less (Ozer & Beycioglu, 2010). Therefore, the current study bridges these two lines of research: teacher stress and professional development. Given that existing empirical and theoretical work indicates teacher stress is negatively associated with the quality of teacher–child interactions, the purpose of this study was to examine whether participation in a high quality professional development intervention targeting teachers' interactions and relationships with students moderates the relation between teachers' self-reported job stress and their observed teacher–child interactions.

1.1. Teacher–child interactions

Types of interactions that are beneficial to young students relate to the emotional and instructional supports provided by teachers, as well as teachers' management of the classroom (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Teachers facilitate the development of students' social-emotional competence by creating warm and emotionally supportive environments infused with mutual respect and positive communication, providing opportunities for autonomy, and demonstrating sensitivity to students' emotions (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Brock & Curby, 2014; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Teachers establish productive and organized classrooms that support academic instruction and student learning behaviors by instituting consistent behavioral expectations and classroom routines, as well as maximizing instructional learning time (Choi et al., 2016; McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). Relatedly, teachers provide high quality instruction by fostering a deeper understanding of academic concepts through open-ended questions, problem solving, and real-world application, and by encouraging language development through conversation, repetition, and elaboration (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Torgesen, 2002).

National trends in teacher–child interactions indicate that the quality of interactions often declines over the course of the year (National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, 2013). To better understand how teachers can maintain high quality interactions with students throughout the school year, researchers need to consider the psychological and professional factors that influence the quality of teacher–child interactions (Rimm-Kaufman & Hamre, 2010). Teachers' emotional well-being contributes to their functioning in the classroom setting (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Sandilos et al., 2015). Teachers who experience high levels of stress face difficulty achieving and sustaining high quality interactions with their students (Li-Grining et al., 2010).

1.2. Teacher stress in early childhood settings

Early childhood teachers are under immense pressure to ensure that their young students are prepared for future success in school. These pressures have been compounded by the reality that early childhood professionals still tend to be underappreciated by society as evidenced by lack of mobility within the career track and disparities in pay between preschool teachers and teachers in grades K–12 (National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2013; USDH, 2016; Whitebook, Philips, & Howes, 2014). The high professional demands and low compensation make early childhood educators particularly vulnerable to stress (Gooze, 2014).

Teacher stress is broadly defined as a negative emotional experience associated with an individual's ability to cope with job stressors (Kyriacou, 2001). Teachers' experience with stress is related to a variety of negative outcomes, such as poor health, lower quality instruction, burnout, absenteeism, and turnover (e.g., Alkon, Ramler, & MacLennan, 2003; Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, &

Breckler, 2000; Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). Stress is also not unidimensional. Teachers' experience with job stress stems from various sources—both personal and environmental influences. Some teacher stress reflects investment in their professional career. Other stress stems from behavioral problems and low motivation on the part of their students. Yet another source of stress emanates from work issues such as high workload, unusually high numbers of students in their class, or too many professional responsibilities (Fimian & Fastenau, 1990; von der Embse, Kilguss, Solomon, Bowler, & Curtiss, 2015).

Prior research has described professional investment stress as the most prevalent source of stress among teachers. Teachers' feelings of stress related to professional investment included frustrations with lack of control over job-related decisions and limited access to professional growth opportunities, as well as a feeling of low intellectual or emotional stimulation (Fimian & Fastenau, 1990). Indeed, more recent data suggest that ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers in the U.S. are limited compared to other high-achieving countries (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010). Additionally, for preschool teachers, perceived lack of control over their job is regarded as a major contributor to job stress and has been shown to be detrimental to classroom practice (Curbow et al., 2000; Hagekull & Hammarberg, 2004; Raver, 2004).

Managing student behavior is another prominent and frequently studied source of stress for teachers, regardless of the grade level taught (Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Neuspiel, & Kinsel, 2014; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). As one example, a study of teacher stress in the primary through secondary grades indicated that stressors related to student behavior had more detrimental effects on feelings of teaching efficacy than stress associated with overall teaching workload (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Moreover, the concurrent relation between high teacher stress levels and increased behavioral issues or teacher–student conflict has been highlighted in the literature regarding teacher well-being (e.g., Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2015).

Structural features of early childhood education, such as large class size and limited planning time, have long been considered stressful aspects of the occupation (Raver, 2004). More recently, increased workload associated with documentation and paperwork has accompanied accountability reforms (Gooze, 2014; Stipek, 2006). In many early childhood settings these high work-related demands do not occur in tandem with adequate job supports, and for that reason, teachers experience high rates of burnout and turnover in the early childhood workforce (6; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Whitebook et al., 2014).

Existing literature shows that teacher stress is complex and multifaceted. Not only is it important to consider the overall job stress a teacher is experiencing, but it is also valuable to examine sources of stress separately to disentangle key stressors that teachers face in their profession (Chang, 2009; Curbow et al., 2000; Klassen, Foster, Sajani, & Bowman, 2009). Furthermore, exploring the ways in which different sources of stress influence teachers' interactions with students has the potential to provide more specific levers for improving school-based professional development and other interventions targeting work-based stress.

1.3. Teacher stress and interaction quality

Teacher stress has consequences for the quality of interactions in the preschool classroom (Hamre & Pianta, 2004), which in turn influences the social, emotional, and academic skills of the young children (Raver, 2004). For instance, preschool teachers who report high levels of stress tend to be in classrooms rated lower in emotional support, classroom management, and instructional support (Collmann, 2012; Li-Grining et al., 2010). Conversely, reductions

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