



When early childhood teachers close the door: Self-reported fidelity to a mandated curriculum and teacher beliefs



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 October 2013

Received in revised form 2 June 2015

Accepted 15 July 2015

Available online 26 July 2015

Keywords:

Teacher beliefs

Self-efficacy

Constructivist beliefs

Curriculum implementation

Constructivist curriculum

Early childhood education

ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of early childhood teachers' beliefs about teaching and self-efficacy beliefs on their self-reported fidelity to a mandated constructivist curriculum. The data were collected from a sample of 308 early childhood teachers from public schools in Turkey. The results of hierarchical regression analyses revealed that early childhood teachers reported a considerably higher level of fidelity to the constructivist curriculum when their beliefs aligned more with the constructivist approach to teaching and had a higher sense of self-efficacy for student engagement and instructional strategies. This impact of teacher beliefs on self-reported fidelity to curriculum implementation was valid regardless of teachers' years of experience, teachers' degree of education, class size, age of the students, length and type of the program, and the existence/nonexistence of a teacher aide in the classroom. Additionally, early childhood teachers' efficacy for instructional strategies moderated the relationship that was found between constructivist beliefs about teaching and self-reported fidelity to learning process. Overall, these findings imply that early childhood teachers' beliefs about teaching and their sense of efficacy in teaching warrant consideration to ensure fidelity to policy documents in educational practice.

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Introduction

The study of the mental lives of teachers emerged as a new approach to research on teaching in the mid-1950s (Shulman, 1986). At the heart of this paradigm was a shift from teacher behaviors to teachers' planning, interactive thoughts, decision-making, and also their theories and beliefs (Clark & Peterson, 1986). This increased attention to understanding teachers' cognition in addition to their behaviors (Fang, 1996) relied on the core assumption that teachers' thinking affects the way they behave (Clark & Yinger, 1977). The present study is a part of this strand of research with its keen interest in teacher beliefs. Especially, we attempted to examine the influence of early childhood teachers' beliefs about teaching and self-efficacy beliefs for teaching on their self-reported fidelity to a top-down curriculum innovation in the context of Turkey.

Kagan (1992) stated that teacher beliefs lie at the heart of teaching. The main reason behind this strong argument is that teachers act more on the basis of their beliefs than their knowledge to cope with the unpredictable nature of the teaching profession (Kagan, 1992). Correspondingly, the current discourses about the purposes

of teacher education programs touch upon guiding teacher candidates to form, reflect on, and change their beliefs (Richardson, 2003). While beliefs apparently constitute a critical component of teachers' professional identity, the existing literature is considered limited with regard to their role in early childhood education (Lee, 2006; McMullen, 2001; Rivalland, 2007). In this respect, it is expected that the present study expands our current knowledge about the relationship between early childhood teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. By developing an understanding about the belief system of teachers, this study can potentially contribute to improvement of professional preparation in teaching and classroom practices (Pajares, 1992).

Definition of beliefs about teaching and self-efficacy beliefs in teaching

Teacher beliefs basically refer to how teachers make sense of their world (Clark & Yinger, 1977). Pajares (1992) recognized that various meanings are interchangeably used for this construct in the literature such as attitudes, values, judgments, opinions, conceptual systems, personal theories, and repertoires of understanding. Among this diversity, Pajares (1992) posited that beliefs are "an individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of

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what human beings say, intend, and do" (p. 316). As beliefs mirror individual judgments, they are, unlike knowledge, subjective, evaluative, and affective (Nespor, 1987). In fact, these features can explain why beliefs that teachers form can greatly influence their decisions, cause disagreement, potentially require reconstruction, and at the same time, be so resistant to change.

As one ingredient of teachers' belief systems, beliefs about teaching are the assertions and claims that teachers and teacher candidates assume to be true about learning, learners, the learning environment, and the content to be learnt (Kagan, 1992). In this study, they pertain to teachers' beliefs about the appropriateness of constructivist and traditional ways of education in early childhood. The other component, teacher self-efficacy beliefs, is derived from the social-cognitive theory of Bandura (1977). Self-efficacy beliefs for teaching stand for the perceived self-images of pre-service and in-service teachers in terms of their abilities to perform actions to fulfill particular teaching tasks (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Especially, in the current study, they address teachers' beliefs about their capabilities in the domains of student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management.

Relationship between teacher beliefs and practices in early childhood education

The beliefs that teachers hold about teaching and their self-efficacy beliefs for teaching have a decisive role in the life of a classroom. To date, literature has revealed that early childhood teachers' classroom practices are consistent with their beliefs about teaching (McMullen, 1999; McMullen et al., 2006; Rivalland, 2007; Vartuli, 1999). McMullen et al. (2005), for instance, found a positive association between developmentally appropriate beliefs and practices of early childhood teachers from five different countries. Charlesworth et al. (1993) similarly pointed to the consistency between teacher beliefs and practices and argued that this congruence was stronger especially in the relationship between inappropriate beliefs and inappropriate practices. Teachers' endorsement of child-initiated learning strategies was positively linked with their use of child-initiated practices in early childhood classrooms (Wang, Elicker, McMullen, & Mao, 2008). Similarly, in the study by Stipek and Byler (1997), there was a negative correlation between teachers' child-centered beliefs and their implementation of skills-based education. In their recent review, Wilcox-Herzog, Ward, Wong, and McLaren (2015) noticed that there is at least a moderate level of congruence between what early childhood teachers believe to be important and what they practice in their classrooms. Yet they caution against that this congruence is especially valid for teachers with higher levels of education, specialized training, and for teachers working in settings without structural barriers. In the light of these findings, in this study, it was hypothesized that early childhood teachers would be more likely to show fidelity to the common principles of the national constructivist curriculum when they espoused constructivist beliefs about teaching more strongly than they supported traditional views of education.

While studies on the relationship between beliefs about teaching and practices mainly center on the consistency between teacher beliefs and practices, studies on teacher self-efficacy beliefs probe the relationship between perceived capabilities of teachers and educational effectiveness. Bandura (1993) strongly underlined that teacher self-efficacy beliefs determine the atmosphere a teacher creates in his or her classroom and the type of learning that takes place in a classroom. The positive effect of teacher self-efficacy on educational practice stems from the fact that teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely than those with the low self-efficacy to engage in a number of important practices including demonstrating a sense of personal accomplishment, holding

positive expectations for student behavior and achievements, taking personal responsibility for student learning, showing a sense of control, and engaging democratic decision-making (Ashton, 1984). Especially, in the context of early childhood education, teacher self-efficacy beliefs predict the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices (McMullen, 1999) and children's gains in print awareness (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010). Also, teacher self-efficacy beliefs are associated with a positive, cooperative, and supportive climate in school environment (Kim & Kim, 2010), and positive teacher-child and teacher-parent relationships (Chung, Marvin, & Churchill, 2005). Given its enhancing effect on teachers and teaching, our hypothesis in this study, consequently, was that early childhood teachers would report a higher level of fidelity to the mandated constructivist curriculum when they had a higher sense of self-efficacy for teaching.

Potential interaction between beliefs about teaching and self-efficacy beliefs

The independent influences of teachers' beliefs about teaching and self-efficacy on their actions are well documented in the literature. To our current knowledge, there seem hardly any studies investigating their potential interactive effect on educational practice. Yet, in the present study, based on the proposition that beliefs compose a system where individual beliefs form interconnections to each other (Rokeach, 1973), it is expected that beliefs about teaching and self-efficacy beliefs about teaching that comprise two components of teachers' beliefs system may be connected and interact with each other.

Of note is that teacher self-efficacy is considered the most important aspect of teacher effectiveness (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977). Bandura (1995) firmly states that self-efficacy beliefs are the most central mechanism of human agency that individuals use to make intentional actions for their functioning. That is, an individuals' performance is profoundly tied to their sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1993). In support of this stance is the positive relationship that was established between teachers' level of self-efficacy and a number of essential aspects of teacher effectiveness such as teacher persistence, enthusiasm, and commitment (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Evidently, teacher efficacy beliefs have a substantial influence on teacher actions. However, the relationship between beliefs about teaching and teacher practices may be weak or even absent considering the evidence that teachers do not necessarily practice what they believe to be important in education (Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2010; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). In their study where they found a weak and even a non-existing relationship between early childhood teachers' curriculum beliefs and their observed behaviors, Wen, Elicker, and McMullen (2011) posited that "a refined and more important question to ask might be when, how, for whom, and under what conditions are teachers' beliefs and practices consistent?" (p. 962). In this study, in the context of a mandated curriculum that explicitly depict what teachers need to believe, it was hypothesized that teacher self-efficacy beliefs would play the leading role in what teachers do in their classrooms. We consider that a sense of high self-efficacy may become the weapon to trigger teachers to exert higher levels of effort to fulfill their given roles even if their beliefs about teaching are less or even not constructivist.

Purpose of the present study

Early childhood education in Turkey underwent a top-down curriculum transition in 2006. The centralized curriculum for 36- to 72-month-old children is essentially based on the constructivist principles of education (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2006). Aligned with this approach, the curriculum that is

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