



# Personal and contextual factors associated with growth in preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs during a longitudinal professional development study



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## H I G H L I G H T S

- Trajectories of change in preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs were examined.
- Invariance of the latent self-efficacy beliefs construct over time was suggested.
- Preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs increased across multiple school years.
- Professional development conditions differentially predicted growth.
- Children's behavior problems had a negative effect on self-efficacy beliefs.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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## A B S T R A C T

There has been limited research on the development of in-service teachers' self-efficacy beliefs across multiple school years. The current longitudinal study investigated (a) how teachers' self-efficacy beliefs change over time and (b) how teacher and classroom characteristics relate to these changes in a sample of 341 US American preschool teachers involved in a professional development intervention. Latent growth curve models indicated that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs increased, particularly for those receiving a coaching intervention. Teacher ratings of children's behavior problems had a negative effect on self-efficacy beliefs. Together, findings highlight the need for support of changing self-efficacy beliefs among in-service teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

Quality in educational settings is largely dependent on effective teachers who are able to engage children in meaningful learning activities, manage classroom routines, and construct positive teacher-child-relationships (Rimm-Kaufman & Hamre, 2010). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are important to effective teaching because of their influence on teaching practices through a variety of

instructional decisions (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Indeed, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are significant predictors of students' academic achievement, motivation, and success at school (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Caprone, 2006; Muijs & Reynolds, 2001) as well as teachers' professional commitment, retention, and job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, & Hogan, 2008; Knobloch & Whittington, 2002). In light of these findings, supporting teachers' self-efficacy beliefs may enhance overall teacher effectiveness.

Previous researchers suggested that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are amenable to change. Various sources of efficacy-building information may stimulate growth and more positive teachers' self-efficacy beliefs (Wyatt, 2010). However, there is a dearth of research

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exploring trajectories of change in teachers' self-efficacy beliefs over multiple school years (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). This is surprising given that several classroom-level (such as class size and composition of students) and school-level characteristics (such as school climate) that influence and shape teachers' self-efficacy beliefs might vary from school year to school year (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Chong, Klassen, Huan, Wong, & Kates, 2010; Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011). The present study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating the extent to which teachers' self-efficacy beliefs change over time, as well as factors that may contribute to these changes. Data comes from the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCRECE) multi-phase randomized controlled trial testing the effects of two professional development interventions on preschool teachers' implementation of language/literacy activities and interactions with children in the United States (see, for example, Hamre et al., 2012 and LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016 for the results of the intervention). The interventions included coursework on effective interactions (Phase 1) and a web-mediated, video-based coaching that targeted preschool teachers' own classroom interactions (Phase 2). Although not specifically designed to address preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, there might be transfer effects of the interventions on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs because of their potential impact on the sources of information teachers use to form these beliefs.

### 1.1. Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs

Research on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs is rooted in social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Most research in the field of education defines teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as a "teacher's beliefs in his or her own capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplishing a specific teaching task in a particular context" (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs influence the goals teachers set, the efforts they invest in teaching, and their persistence when faced with obstacles (Rimm-Kaufman & Hamre, 2010; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The role of self-efficacy beliefs for teacher effectiveness has been characterized as self-fulfilling prophecy: self-efficacy might reinforce beliefs of capability or of incapacity (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

Research on preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs is still scarce. Although it is reasonable to assume that the role of self-efficacy beliefs for teachers' successful professional and teaching behaviors may be similar for preschool, elementary, and secondary school teachers, the particular characteristics of early childhood education may prevent from generalizing results to preschool settings. It has been suggested that patterns of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and their associations with child outcomes may differ between preschool contexts and elementary and secondary school contexts (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010). For example, in many countries, the length of teacher education differs between preschool teachers (typically a two-year degree) and elementary and secondary school teachers (minimum a four-year degree) (Guo et al., 2010). The shorter education training programs for preschool teachers also allow less time for authentic teaching experiences during student teaching internships which might leave preschool teachers with lower self-efficacy beliefs when making the transition into professional teaching (Guo et al., 2010). Moreover, substantial changes to the approaches to teaching in early childhood education programs have been made over the past decade, most prominently in the area of early language and literacy instruction (Guo et al., 2010). This might have dampened preschool teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, in particular of those who have been in the field longer and lack knowledge of new instructional practices to

support young children's learning. In addition, preschool classrooms are very heterogeneous as children entering preschool differ widely in their skills, knowledge, and behavior competencies, thus placing high demands on teachers (Howes & Tsao, 2012). Together, it seems important to longitudinally explore preschool teachers' beliefs about their capacity to influence young children's outcomes in order to develop effective professional development for preschool teachers.

Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in general are not a stable disposition. Instead, they develop and change over time. According to the social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by four primary sources of information: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal. It is argued that these sources of information may strengthen or weaken an individual's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Several qualitative and case studies provide insights into the processes that may support growth in teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Efficacy-building experiences have been particularly highlighted, specifically, personal experience, experience with instruction, and experience with practical knowledge (Atay, 2007). For example, a qualitative study of two African American pre-service teachers found increases in teachers' self-efficacy beliefs over a one-year internship as a result of increasing opportunities for learning to teach (Rushton, 2003). In another study, teachers showed a decline in self-efficacy beliefs when they lacked mastery experiences in implementing new teaching methods (Ross, McKeiver, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1997). Failure in implementing effective teaching practices, for example, when dealing with students who are difficult to teach, may lead to anxiety and stress. As argued by Wyatt (2013), both may relate "to negative efficacy information provided to the teacher by her physiological and affective states" (p. 245). When teachers experienced success, however, self-efficacy beliefs increased (Ross et al., 1997). Using classroom observations and interviews as opportunities to reflect upon teaching experiences, Wyatt (2010, 2013) attributed growth in a teacher's self-efficacy beliefs to the development of practical knowledge that was linked to experiences of success. He also found that engaging in reflective processes with a mentor supported the development of more positive self-efficacy beliefs. If reflection is integrated in modelling and coaching it may benefit growth in self-efficacy beliefs through vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion (Wyatt, 2013).

### 1.2. Potential factors of influence on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs

As discussed above, self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by efficacy-building experiences and a number of contextual variables (Bandura, 1997; Guo et al., 2011). In the field of education, classrooms differ in the extent and types of feedback they provide, and individual teachers vary in how they process information (Cappella, Aber, & Kim, 2016). As such, various teacher characteristics and features of the classroom contribute to teachers' self-efficacy beliefs (Guo et al., 2011).

#### 1.2.1. Teacher characteristics

Mastery experiences are the strongest contributor to self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001). In the context of teaching, teachers use actual experiences of prior success in which to situate their future expectations. Because the length of a teacher's tenure in the field may dictate opportunity for having such mastery experiences, several studies explored the association with teachers' self-efficacy beliefs but findings were inconsistent (Aydin & Woolfolk Hoy, 2005). For example, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) found that novice teachers compared to experienced teachers have lower self-efficacy beliefs.

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