



Self-efficacy of early childhood special education teachers: Links to classroom quality and children's learning for children with language impairment



Ying Guo^{a,*}, Jaclyn M. Dynia^b, Christina Yeager Pelatti^c, Laura M. Justice^b

^a School of Education, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA

^b The Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy, The Ohio State University, OH, USA

^c Department of Audiology, Speech-Language Pathology and Deaf Studies, Towson University, MD, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Early childhood special education (ECSE) teacher self-efficacy was positive.
- ECSE teacher self-efficacy was not directly related to child outcome.
- Low-level teacher self-efficacy in a high-quality classroom improves child outcome.

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ABSTRACT

This study described the self-efficacy of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers ($n = 28$) and investigated relations among teacher self-efficacy, classroom quality, and language and literacy gains of children with language impairment (LI; $n = 108$), as well as the extent to which classroom quality moderated the relations between teacher self-efficacy and children's language and literacy gains. Overall, ECSE teachers received high ratings for their self-efficacy. Lower levels of ECSE teachers' self-efficacy were associated with greater gains in children's language and literacy when children with LI were in classroom with a higher instructional support.

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Literacy is a highly valued skill, as children who read accurately and fluently are likely to succeed in school (National Reading Panel, 2000). The preschool years are a significant period of pre-reading development, in which children establish foundational skills in the areas of language (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) and literacy (e.g., print knowledge, phonological awareness) (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Because preschoolers' language and literacy skills are critically related to later academic success, it is important to identify children, such as those with language impairment (LI), who may exhibit delays in these areas. Within the United States (US), LI is one of the most common childhood disability, with approximately 46% of preschool children who receive special education services identified as having LI as their primary disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In

many other countries, early childhood LI also represents a common disorder among children (Keating, Turrell, & Ozanne, 2001; Lin, 1984). For example, about 2% of Australian children between the ages of birth and 14 have LI (Keating et al., 2001), and 5% of children between the ages of five and 14 have LI in Taiwan (Lin, 1984).

In the US, conventional definitions characterize LI as a developmental disorder of delayed or disordered language ability in the absence of significant sensory, neurological, or intellectual impairments (Leonard, 2000). Researchers in other countries provide a similar definition of LI (Paradis, 2010; Visscher et al., 2010). For instance, researchers in the Netherlands (Visscher et al., 2010) define LI as a condition in which children demonstrate delay in speech and language without the occurrence of cognitive or physical disability, emotional disorder, hearing loss, and environmental deprivation. The consequences of LI are serious and affect children's life-long academic performance, particularly with reading. For example, in the US, approximately 50% of preschool children diagnosed with LI exhibit reading difficulties in second grade. Further, young children

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: guoy3@UCMAIL.UC.EDU (Y. Guo).

with LI are six times more likely to be identified with reading disability in school than non-impaired children (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002). Similar trends are seen elsewhere; for instance, 62% of Chinese children in Hong Kong with diagnosed LI at age five subsequently manifest reading disability at age seven (McBride-Chang et al., 2011). Consequently, it is important to identify salient factors that may influence early reading achievement (i.e., language and literacy) for this population across the globe.

Teachers play an important role in young children's language and literacy development via mechanisms related to teacher characteristics, classroom quality, and children's academic gains (e.g., Guarino, Hamilton, Lockwood, & Rathbun, 2006). Teachers' self-efficacy, defined as their self-perceptions of competence or capability (Bandura, 1995), is one characteristic that has been associated with higher-quality classroom instruction and increased academic performance among children in the classroom (Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison, 2012; Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010). In particular, teachers' self-efficacy has a positive impact on children's language gains through an association with higher level of classroom quality (i.e., the quality of teacher–child interactions), such that classroom quality is a significant moderator of the relations between teacher self-efficacy and children's skills (Guo, Piasta et al., 2010; Guo et al., 2012). Importantly, however, little research has investigated the self-efficacy of early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers, particularly those who teach children with LI. Furthermore, we have little understanding of the relations among preschool ECSE teachers' self-efficacy, classroom quality, and the language and literacy skills of children with LI. Identifying ECSE teachers' self-efficacy, including their capabilities to affect child development, could be of value in better educating and equipping ECSE teachers for the complex task of guiding young children on the pathway to early reading proficiency.

1. Teacher self-efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy is grounded in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997) and is conceptualized as an individual's judgment of their capabilities to attain a desired level of performance (Bandura, 1997). In the field of education, self-efficacy refers to teachers' beliefs pertinent to their ability to bring about desired change in children's achievement (Bandura, 1995). Bandura (1995) proposed that belief in one's abilities is a powerful drive that influences one's motivation to act. Further, self-efficacy is related to the effort one allocates in the endeavor and persistence when faced with setbacks. Therefore, a teacher with low self-efficacy likely puts forth less effort in the preparation and delivery of classroom instruction and gives up more readily when children struggle (Dembo & Gibson, 1985). Given its importance, teachers' self-efficacy has proved to be a powerful construct in studies of teacher quality over time (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). For example, there is an emerging construct named “disposition for teaching” that has been assessed in pre-service education in the US (Damon, 2007, p. 366). This construct captures teachers' beliefs (e.g., self-efficacy) that are essential to the quality of teaching. For example, teacher's beliefs may be directly associated with teachers' competence and motivation to teach (Damon, 2007).

While there is a growing body of literature on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, very little is known about early childhood educators' self-efficacy beliefs. A recent exception is research by Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, and Pianta (2008), which examined 135 preschool teachers in classrooms serving preschool children exhibiting social and/or economic risks in the US, using an abbreviated 7-item version of the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES; Bandura, 1997). This study found that preschool teachers reported having generally high self-efficacy ($M = 4.39$ on a 5-point Likert scale). Further, Guo,

Justice, Sawyer, and Tompkins (2011) used a 20-item version of TSES (Bandura, 1997) to assess preschool teacher self-efficacy and found that 48 preschool teachers in the US who taught children at-risk for academic difficulty reported having similarly high levels of self-efficacy ($M = 3.60$ on a 5-point Likert scale). Finally, in another investigation of 94 general education preschool teachers' sense of efficacy within the US, Todd Brown (2005) utilized the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) and found that these teachers demonstrated high and positive efficacy about their capabilities to teach children ($M = 7.44$ on a 9-point Likert-type scale). Taken together, such findings indicate that general education preschool teachers seem to be optimistic about their abilities to teach young children in the classrooms (e.g., to motivate and engage children, control disruptive behaviors, use effective instructional strategies). Compared with general education preschool teachers, however, research specific to ECSE teachers' self-efficacy has been much more limited.

1.1. Teacher self-efficacy and child reading achievement

A number of studies suggests that teachers' perceived self-efficacy is associated with enhanced reading achievement among typically-developing children across grade levels (e.g., Armor et al., 1976; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Guo, Piasta et al., 2010; Guo et al., 2012). For instance, Goddard et al. (2000) analyzed the levels of self-efficacy of 452 teachers in 50 elementary schools within the US. Teachers' self-efficacy was strongly related to second–fourth-grade students' reading skills, explaining 70% of the between-school variances in student outcomes. Similarly, another study examined the self-efficacy of 2000 teachers in Italian junior high schools and found that teachers' perceived self-efficacy was a significant predictor of students' academic achievement across various content areas (e.g., reading, math, science) when controlling for the previous academic performance (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006). In two recent studies within the US, Guo, Justice, Kaderavek, and McGinty (2012), Guo, Piasta et al. (2010), Guo et al. (2012) found that teachers' self-efficacy significantly predicted preschool children's print knowledge and fifth-grade students' reading outcomes. Finally, a study of 775 teachers from 53 elementary schools located in the Netherlands and showed that teachers' perception of self-efficacy significantly predicted students' language skills (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012). Therefore, teachers' self-efficacy may be an important aspect of the classroom, as it has been shown to be related to children's literacy and academic skills in both the US and internationally.

Notably, no studies in the extant literature, to the best of our knowledge, have examined the relations between teacher's self-efficacy and the achievement of young children with LI. Indeed, there are significant differences between children with LI and their typically-developing peers on the measures of pre-reading skills, such as vocabulary, alphabet knowledge and print-concept knowledge during the preschool years (Justice, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2006; Tomblin et al., 1997). These early gaps may directly contribute to the high rates of reading difficulty among children with LI in the primary grades (Catts, Bridges, Little, & Tomblin, 2008). Thus, as teacher's self-efficacy may be positively related to gains in children's language and literacy skills, identifying the possible associations between ECSE teachers' self-efficacy and the outcomes of children with LI is an important line of research.

1.2. Classroom quality and child reading achievement

In addition to teachers' self-efficacy, classroom quality is associated with children's language and literacy skills (e.g., Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, La Paro,

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