



## Kindergarten teachers' literacy beliefs and self-reported practices: On the heels of a new national literacy curriculum



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

- We analyzed k-teachers' implementation of a national early literacy curriculum.
- They ranked how they, parents and the educational system valued five literacy goals.
- They valued language skills most and code skills least.
- They attributed the opposite to parents and to the educational system.
- They reported that their literacy practices increased with implementation.

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

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### A B S T R A C T

This study took place six years after the introduction of a national early literacy curriculum in Israel. We compared the beliefs of kindergarten teachers on the importance of literacy goals with their perception of parents' and the educational system's beliefs. We examined teachers' self-reported practices and how these practices changed with the curriculum adoption. Teachers ( $N = 120$ ) responded to a closed questionnaire, and 12 of them were interviewed. Incongruence emerged between teachers' own beliefs and the beliefs they attributed to others. This incongruence facilitates understanding of the rationales for their practices and their relationships with parents and professional partners.

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In line with accumulating research on the longitudinal nature of literacy development – focusing on early literacy as the foundation for later literacy achievements – literacy is now internationally recognized as an essential part of the early childhood curriculum (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2011; Oberhuemer, 2005). This recognition spans European countries (Tafa, 2008), the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), China (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011), Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006), and more. This shift away from the traditional conception that reading should be taught only in primary school led to a revision of the curricula and educational practices prevalent in kindergartens.

The present study, conducted six years after publication of a new national preschool literacy curriculum in Israel, aimed to

uncover contemporary insights of kindergarten teachers (K-teachers) concerning language and early literacy education. This study aimed to demonstrate how implementation of a new preschool curriculum may impact teachers' beliefs and practices. Uniquely, this study explored not only K-teachers' own perspectives following an educational curriculum reform but also their view of others' – parents' and policy makers' – expectations from them and from the curriculum. To the best of our knowledge, no study has yet explored the congruence between K-teachers' own beliefs and the beliefs they attribute to parents and policy makers when introducing a new curriculum into kindergartens.

In recent decades, consensus exists among researchers of different languages that children's knowledge on reading and writing develops long before they start learning at school (Aram et al., 2013; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Researchers have studied which competencies are the best precursors of later literacy achievement (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010; Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012). Debate focuses mostly on the comparative importance of code-related skills (letter

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knowledge and phonological awareness) versus oral language competencies (vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills). By and large, the conclusion can be drawn that early code-related skills and oral language competencies in kindergarten are good predictors of literacy achievements in school (e.g., Zhang et al., 2013). However, code-related skills are better predictors of reading, whereas oral language abilities better predict reading comprehension (e.g., Aram, 2005; Shatil & Share, 2003). Contemporary publications, including the Israeli national curriculum “A Foundation towards Reading and Writing in Kindergarten” (Ministry of Education, 2006), recommend promotion of children’s competencies in all areas that may contribute to their literacy development (e.g., Klein & Yablon, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2008).

### 1. K-Teachers’ beliefs about promoting early literacy

Researchers have emphasized the impact of teachers’ beliefs on their pedagogical decisions and classroom practices (Fang, 1996; Mansour, 2009; Yero, 2002). Although, in general, K-teachers’ beliefs have demonstrated some degree of incongruence with their observed practices (e.g., McMullen, 1999; Stipek & Byler, 1997), their beliefs about literacy promotion were found to be related to children’s involvement in literacy activities and to the quantity and quality of literacy materials in class (e.g., Burgess, Lundgren, Lloyd, & Pianta, 2001; McMahan, Richmond, & Reeves-Kazelskis, 1998; McMullen et al., 2006).

Studies examining K-teachers’ beliefs regarding promotion of early literacy (in the U.S.) have categorized these teachers by their tendency to adopt whole-language principles versus phonics or code-related skills for reading instruction (McMahon et al., 1998). Hindman and Wasik (2008) reported that Head-Start teachers share high appreciation for practices related to oral language and book reading, but they vary as to their appreciation of code-related skills and writing. However Powell, Diamond, Bojczyk, and Gerdel (2008) revealed that Head-Start teachers’ conceptions of early literacy emphasized alphabet knowledge and understanding concepts of print. Scull, Nolan, and Raban (2013) described the beliefs of Australian preschool teachers regarding literacy practice. These teachers emphasized the need to promote, first and foremost, children’s understanding of the meaning of text and their ability to use text in relation to the context. Nevertheless, these teachers also expressed awareness of the importance of alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, and early print concepts, and they tended to integrate them into their practices.

Researchers have claimed that educational reformers must consider teachers’ beliefs alongside any reform’s implications on their practices, to avoid resistance and misinterpretations (Fang, 1996; Pedersen & Liu, 2003). Indeed, researchers have asserted that any reform made in the education system must take into account what teachers feel about those changes in light of their beliefs and values, their social and ideological context, and their understandings of the practical implications of the new curriculum (Yero, 2002). Studies have pinpointed factors that may affect teachers’ implementation of curricular innovations, including teachers’ personal beliefs about the effectiveness and the appropriateness of the curriculum, teachers’ personality characteristics, support from colleagues and administrators, the availability of effective professional development programs, and the reform’s cultural and contextual fit (Li et al., 2011; Lieber et al., 2009; Tobin, 2007). Gallant (2009) studied K-teachers’ experiences and reported that many felt frustrated by new requirements, disempowered, and pushed by administrators to implement new policies that were not compatible with their beliefs or their practical context. In light of such empirical findings, researchers have emphasized the need to

listen to and support the teachers as they undergo curricular reforms (Gallant, 2009; Van Veen & Slegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2010).

### 2. Literacy in Israeli preschool educational system

In the 1990s, the Israeli educational system adopted insights deriving from the whole-language approach, based on philosophical pedagogic perceptions that reached Israel from the USA (Brosh-Vaitz, 2006). This approach emphasized the importance of creating a literacy-rich environment providing opportunities to practice interrelated language skills: speaking, comprehending, reading, and writing. K-teachers in Israel were instructed to deliberately avoid dealing with the alphabetic skills.

For many years, Israeli K-teachers were driven by the predominant notion that kindergarten was an educational realm in its own right, unconnected to schools in curriculum or educational practices. The release of official data in 2001 (Shapira, 2001), which revealed poor reading achievements in Israeli schools, marked a turning point in the conception of the role of kindergarten education in general, and especially of promotion of children’s literacy. While the public and professional discourse focused primarily on reading instruction methods at school (whole-language vs. phonics), public committees imposed responsibility upon the preschool educational system for initiating children’s process of learning the building blocks for reading and writing (Shapira, 2001).

The Ministry of Education established a committee of experts (Levin, 2001) whose aim was to offer practical ways to promote literacy in preschool. Following the committee’s recommendations, a national literacy curriculum was developed: “A Foundation towards Reading and Writing in Kindergarten” (Ministry of Education, 2006). This curriculum defined the required goals and expected competencies in five areas: alphabetic skills, emergent writing-reading, oral language, communication skills, and book immersion. The curriculum contained a theoretical background and didactic guidelines, with practical examples for implementation. It emphasized K-teachers’ autonomy in selecting the appropriate instruction methods.

The introduction of the Israeli national early literacy curriculum took place in the context of an overall reform that called for setting standards for expected achievements in K-12. In this context, Israel followed the standards-based accountability movement that has worked its way down into early childhood classrooms worldwide (Hatch, 2002). Following the curriculum’s publication, Israeli professionals joined the international debate between supporters and opponents of the reform. The latter argued that it drives the tendency to make kindergarten more academic and more focused on measurable skills and school readiness at the expense of other important developmental areas.

Keeping in mind that for many years K-teachers’ viewpoints were shaped by the then-prevailing approach that promotion of alphabetic skills is inappropriate for preschoolers-kindergartners, and that early literacy should be acquired mainly through everyday activities, the new curriculum requirements constituted a major change. Additionally, K-teachers had to cope with increasing demands to teach alphabetic skills coming from parents, who became aware of the importance of code-related skills development for school readiness through public discussions in the media.

In the current study, we explored the new curriculum’s impact on K-teachers’ beliefs, perceptions, and literacy-promoting practices. We examined these variables six years after the curriculum’s introduction to allow teachers time to experience the process of adopting the recommended practices and to reveal their impact. Our study had three aims: Our first aim was to compare the K-teachers’ own literacy beliefs with the beliefs that they attributed to parents and with the beliefs that they attributed to the educational

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