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Supporting professional development needs for early childhood teachers: an exploratory analysis of teacher perceptions of stress and challenging behavior

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Abstract: Early childhood teachers are a unique population of teachers and it is important to determine amendable factors that contribute to their stress. According to available research, challenging child behavior is associated with teacher stress and burnout in school-aged teachers. Given the lack of formal and coordinated in-service education and varied qualifications, early childhood teachers are particularly vulnerable to stress. Further, young children are more likely to have challenging behavior given their social-emotional developmental levels. The purpose of this study was to explore teacher characteristics and perceptions related to their stress, commitment, support, and challenging child behavior in their classrooms. Participants included 100 early childhood professionals. A teacher survey was utilized to determine their perceptions related to key variables. Regression analyses documented teacher commitment and challenging behavior in the classroom uniquely predicted variance in teacher ratings of stress and burnout. Commitment to their job was also a significant predictor to their perceptions of challenging behavior. However, only teacher stress/burnout predicted ratings of challenging behavior; thus, relationships among variables may be more complex. Teachers' years of experience and education level were not related to other variables. For exploratory purposes, teacher professional development perceptions were also surveyed and results indicated that the vast majority of early childhood educators felt professional development was a good use of their time and that they wished more opportunities were available; however, most also indicated they felt training covered information they already knew.

Keywords: burnout; challenging behavior; early childhood; professional development; teacher stress.

Introduction

Teachers in early childhood programs need to be prepared to support the various developmental needs of young children [1]. In addition, some young children struggle in specific areas and need teachers to be prepared to provide more tailored support for their development [2]. However, teachers of young children often have diverse educational backgrounds and experiences in teaching and working with young children (e.g. [3]). Furthermore, many teachers of young children have not been formally educated, which requires that they learn on the job and need training in different areas to learn how to support their classes. One area that teachers report they need more training in is working with challenging child behavior. High levels of challenging child behavior in the classroom contribute to teacher stress levels and to needs for additional professional development [4].

In order to provide educational opportunities for teachers in early childhood settings, more information is needed to assess and study the relationships among teacher perceptions of the magnitude of challenging behavior as well as their current stress levels, commitment to teaching, and perceptions of support. Furthermore, more information is also needed on barriers to attendance and their perceptions about the need for and usefulness of professional development. The purpose of this study is to explore such relationships and contribute to the literature in these important areas. The following review of the literature will include a discussion of challenging behavior in children, the need to provide early intervention for children with challenging behavior, barriers for professional development needs, and barriers for early childhood teachers.

Challenging behavior in young children

The developmental changes that occur in all children pose normal challenges for the adults trying to support healthy

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development. Children aged between 3 and 4 are met with increased demands for self-regulation of emotional states and social expectations including taking turns, following directions, and working well with others. Normal developmental bumps for children are often present and transient; for some children, it is difficult to determine if and when they need more instruction and support to work through developmental challenges. What is clear is that many children sustain challenging behavior patterns into elementary school and that serious behavior challenges in older children typically began in their preschool years [2]. Thus, early intervention is critical for young children.

One approach for supporting early intervention options for young children includes educating preschool educators on identification strategies and supports that may be utilized for young children. There are many research-supported strategies and guidelines that can be utilized to support young children across areas of development. However, the use of system-wide approaches for data gathering and careful utilization of resources to support social behavioral growth is not common in early childhood [1]. Thus, from an administrator perspective, it is important to provide some understanding of teacher characteristics that contribute to their perceptions of challenging child behavior and stress as well as ways to support teachers in their own development and growth.

Teacher stress and support needs

There are many challenges when working with teachers of young children that make this population more difficult to work with as homogeneous systems.

Teachers of young children are more likely to have a wide range of educational levels, experiences with children, and knowledge of child development and teaching.

For example, even when teachers have a college degree, their majors may or may not represent early childhood education or a related area. Furthermore, teachers of young children may make minimum wage. These characteristics make this population of teachers even more at risk than their K-12 colleagues for having stress and burnout, especially when navigating high levels of challenging behavior.

The average turnover rate for childcare providers in the US is 30% [5]. Factors affecting turnover include: being less trained, more educated, and reporting higher levels of stress [6]. Children with challenging behavior may increase the level of stress for early childhood educators [1]. This is one of the greatest sources of frustration for early childhood providers [6]. They often feel a conflict between their role as nurturer and disciplinarian. Also, they struggle in

talking with parents about the child's problem behavior. This high level of stress often leads to departure of the childcare provider and therefore the high turnover rate.

Commitment

Another important area for further research is how to support buy-in for early childhood educators in their need for professional development and growth. Research with teachers of older children has documented the need for buy-in before professional development is undertaken, especially when system-wide efforts are established [7]. However, research to date has not investigated early childhood teachers' perceptions of the importance of professional development, overall. Research with preschool educators has surveyed teacher opinions related to specific behavior support practices and use of data to inform decisions [1, 8, 9]. Overall findings include that early childhood teachers report positive perceptions of evidence-based behavioral practices but ratings for the feasibility of using the practices was significantly lower than ratings of importance.

It is clear that early childhood teachers may need more support to work with young children with challenging behavior given the demands of their job, the lack of education in this area, and the stress related to teaching when children have challenging behavior. Children's challenging behavior is especially related to teacher burnout and is, therefore, an important area for research.

Research purposes

The purpose of this study is to explore teacher characteristics and perceptions related to their commitment, support, and challenging behavior in their classroom that are contributors to stress and burnout. As a secondary purpose, several questions regarding perceptions of professional development opportunities were also investigated.

Methods

Participants

Data were collected for 100 early childhood professionals who were part of a larger project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health). Of the participants, the majority were lead teachers (61) and teaching assistants (23). Administrators (directors and assistant directors) within early childhood programs also

completed the survey given many of them also teach within the classrooms (16). Participants were almost all female (99%) and the majority were Caucasian (71%) and African-American (22%) with the remaining participants reporting ethnicities of Asian [2], Native American, and other (one Brazilian). A very small percentage (2%) reported identifying as Latino/a.

The average age of participants was 34.5 years of age. The average number of years working as a child care provider was 7.49 years ($SD = 8.14$) and the average age of years working with young children (from birth to 8 years old) was 6.86 years ($SD = 6.96$). Educational levels reported included: some high school (3%), high school or GED (24%), some college (32%), associate's degree (15%), bachelor's degree (22%), and some graduate school (3%). Thus, the majority of participants had some college or an undergraduate degree. Demographic variables were not associated with any of the other variables investigated in this study (all $p < 0.05$).

Procedures

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board where the research took place. As part of the project, a local child agency recommended specific sites that would benefit from and were receptive to working on building systems of positive behavior supports in their early childhood centers. Of these sites, directors were invited until the study reached capacity for the number of sites for the project. All of the directors agreed to participate and all teachers of preschool-aged children were invited to participate. Of these teachers, 80% consented and completed the surveys.

Measure

The teacher/provider survey is a compilation of established instruments that were adapted for this study. The survey is divided into two parts including demographic information followed by questions to solicit opinions on various topics. Demographic information on demographic and previous experience was collected from all early childhood professionals including age, gender race, job roles, experiences with young children, and education levels.

For the second part of the survey, questions were selected from various highly respected questionnaires and surveys. Job stress was assessed with questions from the Early Head Start Questionnaire for Child Care Providers in Centers, 1998. Job satisfaction, support, and commitment questions were from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), 2011. Established content validity was established from research guiding these measures. Insert internal consistency data for the teacher grouped a priori categories of commitment (two items; $\alpha = 0.55$), stress and burnout (three items; $\alpha = 0.70$), and support (four items; $\alpha = 0.79$).

Results

To address the purposes of this study, descriptive data were analyzed and are presented to explore teacher

perceptions of key study variables. Regression analyses were also conducted to determine if specific teacher perceptions (i.e. commitment, support) and teacher perceptions of challenging behavior in their classrooms are predictive of stress/burnout. Supplementary descriptive data are also presented on teacher perceptions of professional development training needs and past training they have obtained.

Descriptive

Descriptive data on the teacher-rated items for commitment, support, and stress, as well as challenging child behavior, are presented in Table 1. Teachers rated the majority of the items with the responses somewhat or strongly agree. The commitment item had the highest agreement rating with 92% of teachers stating their feel committed to their work as a child care provider. In addition, 84% of teachers rated the items reflecting the support they receive from both parents and their directors in the somewhat to strongly agree categories. Regarding support for challenging behavior, 83% reported they agreed that they had someone to go to for support working with children with challenging behavior and that they felt committed to improving their skills as a child care provider. A little over one-third of teachers reported the level of student misbehavior at their center interfered with their work. Although 35% of teachers also reported agreement that they experienced stress caring for children, only 15% reported intentions of leaving child care, and 17% reported they frequently felt like quitting their job.

Regressions

A regression analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between teacher perceptions of support, commitment, and the level of child misbehavior in the classroom and their reported stress/burnout. Table 2 includes the model fit statistics. The regression model investigated whether teacher support, commitment, and perceptions of the level of misbehavior predicted teacher perceptions of stress and burnout. Results of the linear regression analyses yielded significant predictive power for commitment (28%) and level of misbehavior (10%) for the outcome variable stress/burnout; support did not add significant predictive power to the model. Commitment and level of misbehavior predicted 38% of the variance in the outcome variable stress/burnout.

Table 1: Early childhood teachers' perceptions of support, commitment, and stress/burnout.

	Strongly disagree, %	Somewhat disagree, %	Somewhat agree, %	Strongly agree, %
1. I receive a great deal of support from the center director for the work I do. (S)	2	9	30	54 ^a
2. The level of student misbehavior (e.g. disobeying, horseplay or fighting, etc.) in this center interferes with my work.	2	33	25	10
3. I receive a great deal of support from parents for the work I do. (S)	4	11	42	42
4. I feel committed to my work as a child care provider. (C)	3	3	12	80
5. I intend to leave work in child care in the next month. (BO)	57	24	6	9
6. I frequently feel like quitting my current job. (BO)	59	22	11	6
7. During the past month, I have felt stressed out by the day-to-day demands of caring for children. (BO)	37	25	25	10
8. I have someone I can go to for help when a child in my class is having emotional or behavioral problems. (S)	7	6	25	58
9. Improving my skills as a child care provider is a priority for me. (C)	2	0	29	66
10. The center director talks to me frequently about my teaching practices. (S)	9	11	39	42

^aDue to some nonresponses and percentage estimates, the total may not add up to 100%.

Table 2: Regression analyses.

Outcome	Models-IV	R ² (Δ R ²)	Standard error	F-change	β
Stress/burnout	1. Commitment	0.28 (0.28)	1.99	32.55 ^a	-0.53 ^a
	2. Commitment, the level of misbehavior interferes with my work	0.38 (0.37)	1.86	12.66 ^a	0.31 ^a
	3. Commitment, the level of misbehavior interferes with my work, support	NS	–	NS	–

^ap < 0.01; NS, not significant.

Table 3: Early childhood teachers' perceptions of professional development training.

	Strongly disagree, %	Somewhat disagree, %	Somewhat agree, %	Strongly agree, %
1. Training sessions typically cover information I already know	2	27	51	16
2. Training sessions are not a good use of my time	48	35	8	5
3. I wish there were more child care training opportunities available to me	7	14	50	26

Supplementary data

Given the minimal information to inform the field regarding early educators' training experiences, additional survey items were also analyzed descriptively (see Table 3). For the exploratory analysis of perceptions of past training experiences, 67% of teachers reported training sessions typically covered information they already knew. Only 13% reported believing training sessions were not a good use of time and 76% reported they wished there were more available child care training opportunities.

Discussion

The purpose of this manuscript was to explore the amendable factors that contribute to teacher perceptions of stress and burnout in the classroom. Two characteristics were important contributing factors to teacher stress, commitment, and perceived child challenging behavior. Their commitment (i.e. to their job and to advancing their skills) was associated with stress. This adds to the literature for this important, diverse population of teachers, and for prevention of behavior problems in young children.

Teachers of young children represent a group with a central role in the prevention of behavior problems in schools, yet, they are often the least prepared to do so. Teachers of young children are more likely than any other group to have to help children navigate developmental tasks that are challenging and to support an understanding of learning and assimilating the rules for behavior in groups. How to navigate these systems effectively is not a small task and teachers need to be supported and committed to undertaking this responsibility. It is unlikely that teachers who are not committed, supported, and under stress will be successful. Many will leave the childcare settings due to their level of stress. For those that stay, often, they may contribute to children's behavior problems by using ineffective methods.

Supporting teacher use of effective methods for working with challenging behavior is challenging for all professionals who supervise or train teachers, especially early childhood teachers. Given their varied backgrounds, they may not have any education, formal or in-service, in child development, and need a lot of support from administrators to continue learning [1, 8]. In addition to the challenges administrators face in regard to supporting teachers, teachers own commitment also appears to play an important role in their level of stress and burnout.

Implications for research and practice

Past research has shown that the high turnover rate of early childcare is related to their level of stress. The information obtained from this study is valuable in helping us to understand teacher perceptions of stress/burnout. Specifically, findings direct future research and practice for teacher's perceptions of stress/burnout; it is clear from this study that administrators should strive to increase the level of support provided to early childhood professionals. Implementation of positive behavioral interventions and supports in the early childhood environment can potentially reduce the stress/burnout of childcare providers and will also increase their support. The effect of altering these factors could decrease the childcare turnover rate and result in improved care for young children. However, the role of personal commitment to the job and to improving skills also appears to be important and may be something administrators can screen for when hiring teachers, although it is unlikely that teachers would report a lack of commitment during this stage.

This study also provided descriptive data on educators' training experiences. This information can also be

used to inform future practice. For example, including teachers in identifying their perceived needs for professional development may be helpful for securing buy-in. However, research has also clearly documented that teachers in early childhood have reported they have knowledge of specific areas (i.e. ADHD) when assessments of their knowledge indicate otherwise [3]. In-service opportunities should include pretests to help teachers become aware of misinformation and lack of information on specific topics. Given teachers in this study overwhelmingly (87%) reported believing training sessions were a good use of time and 76% reported they wished there were more available child care training opportunities, it is likely that teachers are willing to participate in training.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study include the relatively small sample size; the childcare population which had varying educational levels, experiences with children, and knowledge of child development and teaching; and the homogeneity of the childcare providers (primarily Caucasian females). Also, the administrators for the childcare programs were the final decision makers in implementing the program at their site. Therefore, the childcare workers may or may not have been as invested in its implementation. Also, they may have engaged in implementation solely because they felt they had to.

Summary

This study investigated relationships between teacher perceptions of support, commitment, the level of child misbehavior in the classroom, and reported stress and burnout. Important relationships emerged that can inform future research in this area. As a supplementary purpose, teachers were also asked to provide ratings for professional development opportunities. Interesting descriptive data emerged, which can be used to inform and improve professional development. It is important to add to the literature in this area as preschool educators are on the forefront of the prevention efforts to support children with challenging behavior. If they have high levels of stress, they will be less able to support children. Further, if children engage in more challenging behavior in the classroom, teachers are at greater risk of burnout and stress.

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