Early childhood teachers' stress and children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood teachers play a key role in promoting children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. We investigated how preschool lead and assistant teachers' personal and job-related stress are, collectively and separately, associated with their perceptions of children's anger-aggression, anxiety-withdrawal, and social competence. Using a sample of 103 teachers from 54 classrooms serving 329 children, we conducted three-level multilevel analyses. Lead and assistant teachers' cumulative personal stress was significantly associated with teachers' evaluations of children's anger-aggression, and cumulative job-related emotional exhaustion was significantly associated with teachers' evaluations of children's anxiety-withdrawal and social competence. Exploring lead and assistant teachers' stress separately, the results showed that lead teachers with higher levels of stress perceived children as having higher levels of anger-aggression and anxiety-withdrawal. On the other hand, assistant teachers' stress was associated with teacher-reported children's social competence. We suggest ways to support children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning through intervening with teachers' stress.

1. Introduction

Children significantly expand their abilities to interact and build relationships with others and to control their behaviors and emotions during their preschool years (Denham et al., 2012; Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). Preschool-aged children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, in turn, contribute to their school readiness as well as to their later development (CASEL, 2013; Darling-Churchill & Greenberg, 1983; Roberti, Harrington, & Storch, 2006). In addition to experiencing high rates of graduation and employment (Raver, 2003; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1981). In the current study, we seek to understand better how lead and assistant teachers' stress, collectively and separately, are associated with their perceptions of children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in early care and education (ECE) settings.

It is well known that the quality of ECE influences children's social and emotional development (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Specifically, ECE programs having better structural quality (e.g., having smaller teacher-to-child ratios and class sizes, teachers with higher educational attainment and training, more administrative support, etc.) have been shown to promote children's social and emotional development (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). In addition, process quality in the classroom, represented by teachers' sensitivity, responsiveness, positive interactions, emotional support, and instructional support, stimulates children's development (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Although it is widely understood that children's social and emotional learning is supported by teachers' abilities to create a positive classroom climate for learning and nurturing, there has been less study of the role of teachers' own emotional health in children's development. This is a concern because early childhood teachers often report that they are highly stressed (McGinty, Justice, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008).

Stress is an individual's emotional state caused by exposure to acute and chronic adverse experiences (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; Roberti, Harrington, & Storch, 2006). In addition to experiencing personal stress, teachers are also likely to experience emotional exhaustion in their work when the demands of the job exceed their resources and introduce conflicts and burdens (Lazarus, 1993). Teachers' personal stress and job-related emotional exhaustion inhibit their abilities to provide consistent emotional support and positive behavior management that children need for their positive social-emotional development (Hamre, 2014). For example, teachers who experience higher stress have less teaching and nurturing capacity to model...
positive emotions and to foster a positive classroom climate (Lazarus, 2006; Zinsser, Bailey, Curby, Denham, & Bassett, 2013). In addition, teachers with higher levels of stress display more negative reactions to children's emotions or challenging behavior and have more conflict with the children in their classroom (Buettner, Jeon, Hur, & Garcia, 2016; Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Goozo, 2015). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest that teachers' social and emotional competence contributes to the social and emotional learning environment, and that this aspect of teachers' work warrants further study to better support children's social and emotional development. The main goal of this study, therefore, is to explore associations between teachers' personal stress and job-related emotional exhaustion and their perception of children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning.

Unlike K-12 classrooms, most preschool classrooms have two or more teachers working together with the children simultaneously. Although the teaching structure may vary by program (co-teaching structure or hierarchical structure), all teachers in the classroom influence children's development (Wells, 2017). For example, lead teachers mainly take a role leading learning activities while assistant teachers monitor children's behaviors. Alternatively, lead teachers primarily work with the whole group of children as assistant (or co-lead) teachers support smaller groups or an individual child who needs extra help. Although assistant teachers also spend significant time with children, few studies have examined both lead and assistant teachers' perspectives. In addition, no studies we know of have explored whether lead and assistant teachers' stress is cumulatively associated with their perceptions of children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning.

Preschool teachers report that they receive the most support from the teachers with whom they share a classroom (Wells, 2017). When both lead and assistant teachers are stressed, they are less likely to be able to seek help from each other. This lack of support may impact the whole classroom climate, which potentially hampers children's learning. In addition, children may receive social and emotional support from any teacher in the classroom when the cumulative stress level is high. When one of the teachers in the classroom is less tolerant and sensitive, it is critical to have another adult available to respond to children's needs. To capture the holistic picture of what children may experience in the classroom, we studied lead and assistant teachers' stress cumulatively. Furthermore, we investigated how lead and assistant teachers' stress is differently associated with their perceptions of children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, understanding that each teacher has unique roles in the classroom.

1.1. Teachers' stress in early care and education

Teacher-perceived personal stress and job-related emotional exhaustion contribute to teachers' capabilities of creating a positive classroom. Buettner et al. (2016) found that teachers' stress was significantly associated with teachers' lower professional commitment and negative responsiveness towards children's emotions. In addition, Whitaker et al. (2015) found that teachers' higher levels of work stress were associated with more conflicts with children in their classroom, reported by teachers. Furthermore, early childhood educators' job-related stress was associated with lower observed emotional support for children (Zinsser et al., 2013), lower quality practices in literacy and numeracy, as well as decreased and lower quality communication with parents (Fantuzzo et al., 2012); a cumulative index of personal stressors was related to lower quality behavior management in the classroom (Li Grining et al., 2010). Although there has been evidence that teachers' stress impacts the way that teachers support children's learning, there are no studies, to our knowledge, that have investigated the associations between teachers' stress and their perceptions of preschool-aged children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Although previous studies have found that teachers' depression is associated with children's behavioral problems (e.g., Jeon, Buettner, & Snyder, 2014; Roberts, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, & DeCoster, 2016), teachers' stress and depression may have a different impact in classrooms. In addition, teachers' stress has been found to be more prevalent than depressive symptoms in ECE (Whitaker et al., 2015).

In K-12 classrooms, teaching has been well documented as a profession of high stress that requires teachers to develop coping skills (Kyriaou, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Higher teacher stress has been linked to lower satisfaction and greater teacher turnover (Jones & Youngs, 2012), which impacts organizational functioning (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012). More directly, increased stress and emotional exhaustion have been shown to negatively affect K-12 classroom quality (Byrne, 1994), as well as students' outcomes, such as standardized test scores, grades, and perceptions of support from teachers (Arens & Morin, 2016). Further, Siekkinen et al. (2013) found that kindergarten teachers who reported higher levels of work-related stress were more likely to report higher impulsivity and lower levels of social skills in children. Studies of the mechanisms behind these relationships have found that more emotionally exhausted teachers are less likely to commit to their work, less likely to employ effective instructional methods (Klussmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2008), and more likely to withdraw from relationships with their students (Chang, 2009), which in turn, predict lower levels of student developmental outcomes (Arens & Morin, 2016). Likewise, more stressed teachers may report that their preschool-age children display lower levels of social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, which may be due to the less than optimal social and emotional learning environments that the teachers are cultivating, or teachers' distorted perceptions of children's behavior precipitated by their own stress.

1.2. Preschool children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning

The current study examines children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning using teachers' report of anger-aggression (externally directed symptoms), anxiety-withdrawal (internalizing symptoms), and social competence. First, anger-aggression captures children's abilities to recognize their own emotions, to understand others' emotions, to regulate their own emotions, and to control their attention and behavior (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Children who have higher levels of anger-aggression tend to express negative affect, defiance, and anxiety in frustrating situations (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Previous studies show that children with more externalizing problems are more likely to manifest conduct disorder, difficulties in maintaining relationships with others, and lower levels of academic achievement in their later life (Lee, 2010). In addition, LaFreniere and Dumas (1996) point out that children with high levels of anger-aggression are more likely to be rejected by peers because they often hurt or disturb others' feelings by negatively displaying their emotions. During preschool years, teachers play a critical role in cultivating children's behavior through adequately intervening with challenging behaviors (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008).

Second, anxiety–withdrawal captures the extent of children's anxiety, sadness, depressive symptoms, and worry (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Children with high levels of anxiety–withdrawal more easily tire or withdraw from social situations and demonstrate lower levels of engagement in social relationships or learning activities (Eisenberg et al., 2001). In a preschool context, these children are prone to play alone, seek continuous and intensive attention from teachers, and easily give up when regular assurance is not provided by adults (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). Compared to children with externalizing behavior problems, children who have internalizing symptoms often receive less attention from teachers because their problems are less apparent and more difficult to detect (Berg-Nielsen, Solheim, Belsky, & Wichstrom, 2011). However, preschool children's internalizing behaviors are associated with lower language and literacy performance, indicating that these children may be at greater risk of school failure than those with externalizing behavior problems (Bulotsky-Shearer, Fernandez,
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