



Chinese pre-service teachers' beliefs about hypothetical children's social withdrawal and aggression: Comparisons across years of teacher education

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Pre-service teachers made distinctions between shyness and unsociability.
- Pre-service teachers perceived shyness to be more problematic than unsociability.
- Differential beliefs were found across year in pre-service teacher education.
- Novice pre-service teachers worry and intervene more than their senior counterparts.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Chinese kindergarten pre-service teachers' beliefs about hypothetical children's problematic behaviors with peers. Pre-service teachers responded to depictions of children displaying social withdrawal (shyness and unsociability) and physical aggression (for comparison). Among the results, pre-service teachers perceived aggression as the most problematic behavior, followed by shyness and then unsociability. Results suggested that pre-service teachers in later years of the program were able to make fine-grained distinctions between subtypes of social withdrawal. Our research lends support to the notion that pre-service teachers' beliefs may be susceptible to change. Results are discussed in terms of pedagogical development and cultural context.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' *beliefs* can be conceptualized as their general knowledge, thinking, and feelings about objects, people, and events that impact their interactive thoughts, relationships, and classroom planning (Fang, 1996; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Teachers' general beliefs about children's social behaviors impact children's socio-emotional and academic development (Fang, 1996). For example, teachers' beliefs have been found to contribute to their teaching styles, classroom management strategies, and responses to children's behaviors (Vartuli, 1999), as well as influence children's relationships with peers and the formation of teacher-student relationships (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufmann, 2009). However, during

the years of pre-service teacher education, these beliefs undergo substantial change (Appl & Spenciner, 2008; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Nettle, 1998). Accordingly, the years of teacher education represent an important and unique context in which to examine the evolution of such beliefs.

As beliefs are rooted within a broader social and cultural context (Super & Harkness, 2002), culture may influence pre-service teachers' beliefs about acceptable and unacceptable classroom behaviors. Indeed, several studies examining teachers' beliefs and children's social development highlight the importance of considering cultural values (e.g., Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1993; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). In the present study, we focused on pre-service teachers' beliefs from Mainland China, a cultural context where there has been limited previous studies examining teachers' beliefs about children's classroom social behaviors (e.g., Killen, Ardila-Rey, Barakkatz, & Wang, 2000; Li, Coplan, Archbell, Bullock, & Chen, 2016). Further, we explored beliefs about two common classroom behavior problems among young children, social withdrawal and

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aggression. Both of these behaviors are associated with a host of negative academic and social outcomes (e.g., Crick et al., 2006; Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009).

Accordingly, the primary aim of the present study was to examine the beliefs and reactions of Chinese kindergarten pre-service teachers in different years of their teacher education program (i.e., year 1, year 2, year 3, and year 4) towards hypothetical vignettes depicting young children displaying social withdrawal (i.e., shyness and unsociability) and physical aggression.

1.1. Teachers' beliefs about children's social behaviors

The majority of the research on pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about children's behaviors has been conducted in Western culture (e.g., Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Coplan, Bullock, Archbell, & Bosacki, 2015; Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor, 2011; Deng et al., 2017). In this section, we review previous studies of in-service teacher beliefs about social withdrawal and aggression.

1.1.1. Social withdrawal

Socially withdrawn children choose to play alone in the presence of available playmates (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Therefore, socially withdrawn children may not experience the unique benefits of peer relationships, and are at an increased risk for a wide range of socio-emotional difficulties (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Social withdrawal has been described as an umbrella term, encompassing different forms of socially withdrawn behaviors stemming from different motivations to play alone (Rubin & Coplan, 2004). Two different forms of social withdrawal are *shyness* and *unsociability* (Rubin & Coplan, 2004). In both Western and Chinese culture, it has been found that teachers make fine-grained distinctions between these forms of social withdrawal (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Coplan et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016).

Shyness refers to wariness and anxiety in the face of socially novel situations and perceived evaluation (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). It has been well documented that children who display shy behavior are at an increased risk for a host of negative outcomes, such as internalizing problems, peer difficulties (i.e., exclusion and victimization), and poor school adjustment (e.g., Coplan et al., 2004). Historically, shyness was positively valued in traditional Chinese culture (e.g., Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005; Ho, 1986; King & Bond, 1985). However, more recent research has found associations between shyness and adjustment problems among children (e.g., Coplan, Liu, Cao, Chen, & Li, 2017; Liu et al., 2017).

It has been previously suggested that teachers may encourage shy behavior in the classroom as it eases classroom management demands (Evans, 2001). However, more recent research suggests that although teachers have more positive views about shy versus disruptive behaviors (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007), they do perceive shy behavior to be problematic with regards to peer responses and academic outcomes (Coplan et al., 2015; Thijs, Kooman, & van Der Leij, 2006). Of particular interest to this study, Author and colleagues (2016) examined Chinese teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions about depictions of shy behavior and found that teachers expressed the most worry about shy children compared to the other behaviors (with the exception of physical aggression). Moreover, teachers anticipated the most negative consequences for shy behavior in the peer domain, and expected shy children to underachieve academically.

Unsociability refers to the process whereby children withdraw from peer interactions for a preference for solitary activities, with

the absence of emotional distress (Coplan et al., 2004). In Western culture, it has been found that unsociability is relatively benign and is not concurrently related to indices of socio-emotional maladjustment (Coplan & Weeks, 2010). Less is known about unsociability in China. However, it has been suggested that unsociability may be negatively viewed, as it deviates from cultural norms of group affiliation (Chen, 2010). In support of this, recent studies have demonstrated that unsociability among Chinese children is associated with internalizing and peer problems (e.g., Ding et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017; Nelson, Hart, Wang, Wu, & Jin, 2012).

A handful of Western studies have examined teachers' beliefs and attitudes about, and responses to children's unsociable behavior. For example, Arbeau and Coplan (2007) found that teachers reported to tolerate unsociable behavior more than shyness and aggression, and perceived less academic costs. Similarly, Coplan and colleagues (2015) found that teachers reported more positive views about children's unsociable behaviors in comparison to shy and aggressive behaviors. Li and colleagues (2016) reported that Chinese teachers hold less negative views towards hypothetical depictions of unsociability compared to all other potentially problematic behaviors. It was suggested that unsociable behaviors might be more age normative in early childhood, particularly within the context of the kindergarten classroom. However, teachers perceived unsociable children to be ignored by their peers.

1.1.2. Aggression

In the present study, a hypothetical scenario depicting physical aggression was used as a comparison to those of social withdrawal. Physical aggression refers to the intent to hurt or cause bodily harm to another, by using brute force (i.e., hitting, kicking), or by engaging in physical intimidation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In Chinese culture, aggression is strictly prohibited as it may disrupt social harmony (Chen & French, 2008). Research has shown that physical aggression is associated with a host of maladaptive outcomes at school including socio-emotional and peer difficulties (Chen, Huang, Chang, Wang, & Li, 2010; Tseng, Banny, Kawabata, Crick, & Gau, 2013).

Moreover, Chinese children who display aggressive behaviors are at increased risk for public humiliation by their teachers and peers (Chen & French, 2008). In Western culture, teachers hold the most negative views towards children's displays of physical aggression compared to other behaviors (e.g., Coplan et al., 2015). Findings from Li and colleagues (2016) study replicated these results. Specifically, teachers reported the least tolerance for physical aggression and reacted with the most anger and worry as compared to the depictions of other social behaviors.

1.2. Pre-service teachers' beliefs

A review of the literature revealed that the majority of studies on pre-service teachers' beliefs and attitudes have focused on their perceptions about broader constructs such as problem behaviors and mental health issues (e.g., Cevher-Kalburan, 2015; Dellamattera, 2011; Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2004; Landau, Milich, Harris, & Larson, 2001). Comparatively fewer studies have examined pre-service teachers' beliefs, attitudes or perceptions about socially immature (i.e., shy, socially withdrawn, anxious) behaviors and socially defiant (i.e., aggressive, bullying) behaviours (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988; Deng et al., 2017; Lapota & Nowicki, 2014; Psalti, 2017).

Results from a sample of pre-service teachers indicated they

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