To whom little is given, much is expected:
ECE teacher stressors and supports as determinants of classroom quality

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Introduction

• Much is expected of early care and education (ECE) teachers, as they shape children’s experiences in ECE classrooms (Hamre, 2014; IOM & NRC, 2015; Phillips, Austin, & Whitebook, 2016).

• Research on teacher characteristics that predict classroom quality has typically focused on structural characteristics of teachers – teacher education and certification level; teacher turnover and pay.

• But less is known about teacher characteristics more proximal to daily interactions with children.

• An emerging research base focuses more intently on the teacher characteristics most likely to influence proximal interactions with children.

• Teacher mental health and economic stressors have received the most attention (e.g., Buettner et al., 2016; Whitaker et al., 2015)

• Less attention on the supports provided to ECE teachers at home or in the workplace.

• Such supports could mitigate teachers’ negative emotions, bolster their emotion regulation, and enhance their capacities for patience and sensitivity with children.

Method

• Data were collected as part of the larger Tulsa SEED study, a 7-year longitudinal study following low-income children in Tulsa from 3-year-old pre-K (in 2016) through 4th grade (in 2023).

• Teachers self-reported on stressors and supports, and 2 observers documented quality in a typical morning in the classroom.

• Sample: 109 lead teachers who taught Tulsa SEED study children in their 4-year-old pre-K year (2017-18)

Measures

Teacher stressors

• Economic stressors: food insecurity; low salary relative to living wage in Tulsa

• Life stressors: household chaos; elevated depressive symptoms; poor physical health

Teacher supports

• Workplace supports: drawn from the Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning (SEQUAL) survey (Whitebook & Ryan, 2015)

• 6 subscales measuring quality of work life, teamwork, wellness supports, applying learning in the classroom, child assessments use and supports, and pay and benefits

• Family supports: emotional and instrumental support from family members

Classroom quality

• Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS Pre-K; Pianta et al., 2008): Emotional support, Classroom organization, Instructional support

• Adapting Teaching-Style Rating Scale (ATRSRS, Raver et al., 2012): Classroom management, Social-emotional instruction, scaffolding of peers

• Narrative Record (NR; Farran et al., 2015): quality of instruction, count of “red flags” (e.g., sarcasm, eye-rolling)

Results

Predicting quality from stressors and supports

Discussion

• This study represents an important – but preliminary – step toward understanding the role of previously understudied teacher stressors and supports as determinants of classroom quality

• Although it is premature to offer guidance for action steps, continued efforts are needed, both to identify and replicate true associations and – even for those stressors and supports not predictive of quality – to improve the working conditions and wellbeing of ECE teachers on the grounds of human rights and gender equity

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