

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Strategies Supporting Early Childhood Education Teachers' Sense of Self-Efficacy

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Early childhood education programs in the United States shifted to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Early childhood educators faced many challenges around instruction, student engagement, and strategies that would support families during this time. As educators grappled with trying to implement practices that would be effective online, they also struggled with lower levels of self-efficacy. The present study explored how student engagement impacted teaching and learning and particularly how administrative and family support impacted teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Implications for effective early childhood teaching strategies and the structures that need to be in place to support teachers' self-efficacy will be discussed.

Keywords: self-efficacy, challenges, COVID-19, online/virtual, early childhood

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 health crisis forced early childhood education (ECE) programs to move to online instructional platforms. Educators were faced with the challenge of having to teach and engage young children through a screen without any guidelines on how to shift to online teaching. ECE teachers had to implement this change with very limited teaching resources and support systems in place. Additionally, the notion that ECE teachers needed to provide instruction that aligned with traditional theoretical approaches that included exploration through play, music, and the arts (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011) was an insurmountable task that negatively influenced teachers' sense of self-efficacy.

Social-Emotional and Engagement Challenges

Early childhood educators reported issues with student learning as a result of the lack of student motivation (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). A main concern reported revolved around the development of social skills. Particularly as social interaction, group work, small group pair and share, and many other typical peer and collaborative teaching practices were difficult to implement (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Nonetheless, the most challenging task ECE teachers reported was the ability to keep young children engaged (Szente, 2020). ECE teachers specifically reported difficulties around maintaining students' attention and engagement during active activities involving music and movement. Additionally, educators reported the challenges in managing students' emotional well-being. The effects of the drastic change in routines, explicitly not being able to engage with peers and their teacher, impacted children's emotional and social development (Singh et al., 2020). Teachers reported young children feeling confused, disengage, lonely, scared, sad, overwhelmed, and anxious.

Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy Challenge

While managing issues with engagement, social, and emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, ECE teachers also faced many challenges with their sense of self-efficacy. Teacher's sense of self-efficacy is typically aligned with the level of support they receive from their administrator and the students' families (Stipek, 2012). This is important as teachers' perception of support from their school leaders can positively or negatively affect self-efficacy which then impacts instructional practices (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008) and student performance (Stipek, 2012). Teachers reported that one major challenge when turning to online instruction, was the lack of support from school administration (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Teachers' perceptions of parental support was also critical to teachers' sense of efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Specifically, communication and collaboration between parents (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

As a result of the COVID-19 health crisis and the ongoing growing discussion on online teaching platforms in early childhood, this study explored the experiences and challenges related to online teaching in the ECE field. This study examined teachers' self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Explicitly, the challenges and supports that teachers experienced during this period, such as school administration parents support and their impact on teachers' sense of self-efficacy. The present study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What have been teachers' most common experiences and challenges while teaching young children online during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. To what extent has support from the school administration, support from families, and open communication with families impacted teacher self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RESULTS

This study looked at teachers' experiences and challenges while they taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect of these challenges teachers sense of self-efficacy.

Research Question 1: What Have Been the Most Common Teacher Experiences and Challenges?

Teachers found it most challenging to support social skills, such as helping children make friends, adjust to routines, and follow rules. They reported fewer challenges when it came to the actual content and instructional skills. However, determining and implementing instructional activities that were developmentally appropriate and engaging online, was difficult. Teachers found that not all strategies worked with young children equally nor did activities that had traditionally worked well in person, work effectively online. Storytime/reading books, one-on-one games, sing-alongs, and one-on-one time between children and teachers were most effective on most online platforms. Direct whole class instruction and hands-on activities without an adult assisting at home, were the least effective. These type of teaching practices led to a major decrease in participation from many students. Teachers indicated that only about half the class typically participated in these hands on and whole group activities.

Consequently, teachers reported challenges around the ability to support students emotional skills. In this study 53 early childhood teachers were asked to rate their perception of the emotions their students felt during remote learning. Teachers reported that 44% of the students were somewhat disengaged, while 36% were very disengaged. Results showed that 44% of students were somewhat confused, 44% were very confused, 50% of the students were somewhat overwhelmed, and 25% were very overwhelmed. Teachers also reported that 45% of the students were somewhat sad, 25% of them were very sad, 28% were somewhat anxious, 61% of the students were very anxious, 36% felt somewhat lonely, 24% felt very lonely, and 39% were somewhat scared, while 21% were very scared (see Tale 1).

TABLE 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Well-being

Emotions young children experience during online classes	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Confused	53	1.00	4.00	2.67	.95
Disengaged	53	1.00	4.00	2.56	.86
Lonely	53	1.00	4.00	2.03	.97
Scared	53	1.00	4.00	1.86	.94
Sad	53	1.00	4.00	2.18	.89
Overwhelmed	53	1.00	4.00	2.18	.85
Anxious	53	1.00	4.00	2.28	.94

Research Question 2: To What Extent Did Experiencing Support Predict Teacher Self-Efficacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Teachers reported experiencing significantly lower levels of self-efficacy while teaching online after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic than when they taught in person. Specifically, this question examined to what extent support from school administration, support from schools in the program, and open communication with families predicted teacher efficacy after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results revealed that support from school administration, support from families in the program, and open communication with families were statistically significant. Suggesting that an increase in feeling supported by the families in the program and school administration significantly predicted teacher efficacy after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Strategies to Support Teachers' Self-Efficacy

One of the major findings of this study indicates that teachers experienced challenges with student engagement which then negatively impact teachers' self-efficacy. Activities such as storytime/reading books, sing-alongs, and one-on-one time between student and teacher translated well in an online format. ECE teachers found that these activities maintained student engagement for longer periods of time. Activities that engage only the auditory and visual senses tend to translate well online between teacher and student. This suggests that when trying to implement activities that engage additional senses, it is critical that teachers engage in a collaborative pre-planning session with the student's family as these activities do not translate well online. Teachers need to select activities that are considered to be technologically appropriate in order to increase student engagement. This means that one key concept to increasing engagement is first determining what activities can be done in small or one-to-one groups with or without adult support at home. Once this has been determined, considering how to implement the activity, explicitly, the time and day of the week and whether this will be a live session or pre-recorded session is critical. As part of continuing the effort of implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies, in a virtual platform, understating each child's home circumstance and scheduling challenges the family may have needs to be a consideration for teachers when deciding to implement an activity. Consequently, administrators can provide workshops for teachers who are struggling with the implementation of technological appropriate practices in ECE.

The concept of pre-planning leads to the second challenge teachers faced which was lack of family support and the impact this then had on teachers' self-efficacy. While more experiential type of activities can be done virtually, they required an adult to support children at home. Hence, including families in the planning stages would be most effective approach to foster activities that engage all senses. In turn, this can have a positive impact teachers' self-efficacy. Providing parents with a way of communicating with teachers when issues come up can better support virtual student learning. Having parent-teacher conferences by video or phone, holding virtual home visit to check in with families on a personal level, and offering opportunities for parents to provide feedback around remote learning, can serve as successful opportunities for families to take a more active role in teaching and learning virtually as well as supporting students' social and emotional needs.

A third major finding that teachers faced was the lack of administrative support and its negative impact on teachers self-efficacy. Thus, administrators need to create practices that can support teachers' confidence levels during challenging times. Specifically, administrators, need to create an open form of communication with each teacher. They need to provide teachers with the platforms and the proper training to teach through new technologies. It is important for administrators to create an online culture of care where teachers are acknowledged, and all achievements and transitions are celebrated. Touching base with teachers during faculty meetings and using this platform to share those achievements is key to creating a supportive online culture. Having those in leadership make space and time for teaching strategies for self-care is as important as providing curriculum training. Especially, since self-care is used a strategy for trauma informed practices.

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