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What does it matter what I think?
Challenging teacher-child relationships, perceptions, power, and prophecy

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Introduction

- Teacher stress is problematic because of the deleterious effects it has on teacher’s wellbeing (McEwen, 2008). Problem behaviors are one of the most common sources of teacher stress (Kyriacou, 2001).
- Problem behaviors embedded within challenging relationships conflict with teachers’ basic need for relatedness with their students (Spilt, Koomen, Thijs, 2011).
- What teachers think matters. Research highlights the importance of mental representations, which contain sets of beliefs and feelings regarding the teacher, the student, and the teacher–student relationship (Spilt, Koomen, Thijs, 2011)
- Appraisals, which are emotions elicited by judgments of events and situations (Chang, 2009; Smith & Lazarus 1990)

...in understanding how teachers internalize challenging relationships in ways that affect their overall wellbeing.

Pilot Project

Project REWRITE
- Pilot tested a structured reflective writing intervention focused on improving teacher well-being and effectiveness
- Data were collected from semi-structured reflective writing notebooks generated during the 3 month intervention
- Participants (N = 16 Head Start teachers in South Carolina)
- Mean years teaching pre-k children = 10
- 13 participants had a two year degree or higher
- African American 2
- Native American 2
- White/Caucasian 10
- Did not report

An interpretive analysis was conducted using emergent codes

Research Questions
1. What are teachers’ experience of relationships with challenging children in Head Start classrooms?
   Emergent coding was used to unpack teachers observations and interpretations of children’s problem behaviors
   Descriptions of Relationships (Positive or Negative)
   Description of the Challenge (a behavior or a student)

2. What are teachers’ appraisals of children’s problem behaviors?
   Emergent coding was used to unpack teachers appraisal of the challenge
   Reasons the relationship is so challenging
   Rooted: outside teacher’s control (Child or Family)
   inside teacher’s control (Teacher or Relationship)

3. How does an understanding of teachers’ experiences of problem behaviors and challenging relationship appraisals illuminate teacher wellbeing among Head Start teachers?
   Coded responses were used to generate paths according to RQ1 and RQ2
   Observation, interpretation, and appraisal were used to determine directions toward resilience or distress

Results
   - Distress: “The relationship I have with this child is like a tug of war. Sometimes it’s like a power struggle. The child does what he wants to at home, so he thinks it should be that way at school also.”
   - Resilience: “Many times throughout the day we struggle with each other... Sometimes [when I ask a question] he will answer, but many times he will not. I know how smart he is and I want him to participate and answer questions, but he does not at times so we struggle.”

Discussion
- These results begin to unpack the components of challenging student-teacher relationships in Head Start classrooms, providing a first step toward, “better performance, a higher degree of professional satisfaction, and, consequently, a higher level of teacher retention” (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005, p 483).
- Next steps include comparing the resilience and distress participant groups by utilizing the quantitative data from Project REWRITE to consider outcomes including (wellbeing, burnout, self-efficacy, and teacher-student interactions).

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