The Teacher-Assistant Dyad: Understanding how pre-k classrooms balance instruction, emotional support, and management across the teaching team

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STUDY AIMS

- To explore patterns of lead teacher-teaching assistant behavior within and across pre-kindergarten classrooms
- To examine the extent to which teaching team and classroom characteristics are different by latent group

METHOD

Lead teacher and assistant were observed for up to three-three snapshots per day for 3 day-long visits across the school year.

Examine four behaviors of interest related to measures of effective classroom behaviors. Each variable was observed for both the lead teacher and assistant.

Quantity of Instruction: Proportion of snapshots when individual was observed in instruction.

Quality of Instruction: Average level of inference during instruction.

Quantity of Behavior Management: Proportion of snapshots when individual was observed in behavior management (approving or disapproving).

Tone: Average tone/affair across snapshots

RESULTS

Patterns Within Classrooms
For the four behaviors of interest, the correlations between teachers and assistants in the same classroom were positive and moderate (r’s ranged from .28 to .47)

Patterns Across Classrooms
In this sample, two latent groups were identified. Group 1 was more likely to have higher quantity of instruction and more positive tone for both teacher and assistant. Group 2 was more likely to have higher quantity of behavior management by both teacher and assistant (see Figure 1.)

Differences in Team and Classroom Characteristics
No statistically significant differences were found on any teaching team or classroom characteristics between the two latent groups (see Table 1)

The Higher Instruction group displayed a trend towards greater teacher experience, a higher proportion of ELL students, and children with lower entering academic skills.

INTRODUCTION

In pre-k programs, teaching assistants (TAs) meet ratio requirements, but are increasingly taking on instructional responsibilities.

Teachers and assistants are expected to work together as a teaching team. Past research on effective classroom behaviors has looked at the lead teacher almost exclusively. The question is how do teaching teams handle these expectations. Behaviors of teachers and assistants in pre-k classrooms were assessed and compared in three key areas: instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization.

PARTICIPANTS

Lead teachers and assistants from 80 public pre-k classrooms participating in a large-scale curriculum evaluation. Lead teachers had an average of 7.58 years of experience. All teachers had at least a bachelors degree. Assistants had an average of 4.92 years of experience. Experience ranged from high school diploma to graduate level work.

Assistants and teachers had been working together an average of 3.18 years.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

Correlations examined the relationship between teachers and assistants within a classroom.

Latent Class Analysis (LCA) (MPlus software) was used to explore patterns of behavior for teaching teams across classrooms.

- Separately for teachers and assistants, independent variables were dichotomized along a median split.
- Models run for 2-4 latent classes; selected model based on model fit criteria (BLRT and BIC) identified 2 latent groups of classrooms.

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Differences in Teaching Team and Classroom Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Instruction (n=48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Demographics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion HIP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering academic skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering self-reg skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of Pre-K academic skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of Pre-K self-regulation skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Further research is needed on both the antecedents and consequences of the identified patterns of classroom behavior.

Future research in pre-k classrooms should consider or include the role of the teaching assistant(s).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by Institute of Education Sciences grant R305A09053-10 awarded to D. Farran, M. Lipsky, and S. Wilson.

REFERENCES

