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Kindergarten Teacher Autonomy in High and Low Socioeconomic Environments

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**KINDERGARTEN TEACHER AUTONOMY IN HIGH AND LOW
SOCIOECONOMIC ENVIRONMENTS**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Early Childhood and Family Development

By

Allison Catherine McDonald

May 2018

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Childhood Education and Family Development

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Kindergarten teachers are immersed in a high stakes educational environment and this environment has altered how kindergarten teachers must teach. Exploring the different distribution of autonomy in high and low-income groups contributes to the research about educational equity. This study examined the relationship between income level of teaching environment and kindergarten teachers' levels of self-perceived autonomy. The research question that guided this study was: do kindergarten teachers in higher income schools experience greater levels of self-perceived autonomy than kindergarten teachers in low-income schools? The Teaching Autonomy Scale developed by Pearson & Hall (1993) was used to survey 91 kindergarten teacher participants from 31 states. The findings showed a significant gap in self-perceived autonomy between the two socioeconomic groups. Kindergarten teachers in high-income school environments had significantly higher self-perceived autonomy than kindergarten teachers in low-income environments. The findings contribute to the body of research about teacher self-perceived autonomy and the effects of school level income.

KEYWORDS: autonomy, kindergarten teachers, socioeconomic status, equity, teaching environment

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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INTRODUCTION

The high stakes educational atmosphere that permeates public schools trickles down to the youngest students and their teachers (Bassok, Lantham, & Rorem, 2016). One way that this environment affects teachers is that they feel pressure to change how they teach and to relinquish autonomy to meet the expected requirements (Olivant, 2015). Teachers in lower-income schools report the more frequent use of more didactic methods, packaged curricula, and scripted materials (Stipek, 2004). Teachers in more affluent schools report feeling that their autonomy is protected from the higher level mandates because of the school level income and existing standardized test scores (Goldstein, 2007).

Teaching autonomy is defined by Pearson and Hall (1993) in two spheres. The first is general teaching autonomy that is related to work environment, classroom management, and how creative a teacher can be with their approach to teaching. The other sphere of autonomy is that of curricular autonomy that can be defined as the freedom a teacher has to make need based instructional choices in their classrooms.

As the high stakes environment requires teachers to change their practice to meet more rigorous standards, are these changes felt equally across socioeconomic lines? Do kindergarten teachers have similar levels of self-perceived autonomy when teaching in different socioeconomic environments? In the review of the literature that follows, the current kindergarten environment and how it affects teacher autonomy and ultimately practice is explored. The existing research regarding the difference in how these

pressures and expectations are experienced by teachers in high and low-income environments will be discussed as well as the gaps in the existing research.

Definition of Terms

1. Teaching Autonomy: For the purpose of this study teacher autonomy is defined by Pearson and Hall (1993) as the ability teachers to have to control their own actions and their work environment. The researchers also found there to be two spheres of autonomy; general teaching autonomy which encompasses work environment, classroom management, and how creative a teacher can be with their approach to teaching. Curricular autonomy is defined as the freedom a teacher has to make instructional choices in their classrooms as needed.

2. Developmentally Appropriate Practice: The National Association for the Education of Young Children defines Developmentally Appropriate Practice as a framework for teaching children birth to age 8 with a foundation in child development research. Developmentally Appropriate Practice focuses on teachers addressing children's needs and abilities individually as well as part of a group. The three key components of this framework are knowledge of child development, children's individual needs, and teaching in culturally appropriate ways (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009)

3. Free and Reduced Price Lunch: The National School Lunch Program, also known as Free and Reduced Price Lunch is a national program that uses family income to determine eligibility for free or reduced price school lunches. It is also commonly used to determine school socioeconomic levels. Students who have a family income at or below 130% of the poverty line receive free lunches while those between 130% and 185% have reduced lunch prices. A school is labeled as high poverty if more than 75% of the students qualify for participation in the program, and low if less than 25% qualify (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

4. High Stakes: The term high stakes refer to the use of accountability measures, most commonly standardized tests that have impacts on students, schools, and districts. The impacts can be positive or negative and result in changes to funding, sanctions, and compensation (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

Research Question

RQ1: Do kindergarten teachers in high socioeconomic school environments have higher levels of self-perceived teaching autonomy than kindergarten teachers in lower socioeconomic environments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kindergarten Environment

Play kitchens, blocks, and water tables are all things one would expect to see in kindergarten, but for many students they are no longer present in their classrooms (Bassok et al., 2016; Goldstein, 2007). Research suggests that not only are these mainstays of kindergarten disappearing, many teachers report that play is seen by administrators as wasted instructional time (Graue, 2009). Kindergarten teachers report that while their focus was once on development, now it is on achievement with developmentally inappropriate expectations including extended periods of time with teacher-directed instruction (Minicozzi, 2011).

Kindergarten is considerably more academic than it once was, and as instruction has been streamlined into specific academics, the way that kindergarten teachers are required to teach has changed. Research found that full-day kindergarten students spend an average of 4 to 6 times as much time on academic activities than on play (Graue, 2009). This finding is supported by research published in 2015 that found that just 1% of the day in pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade classrooms was spent in play-based learning (Alford, Rollins, Padron & Waxman, 2015). For children of color and low-income students, the research is more grim, as children in both of these subgroups were taught in more didactic methods than their wealthy white peers (Stipek, 2004). As Bassok et al. (2016) found the trend is still moving towards more academics and accountability especially for schools serving a high proportion of low-income students.

Expectations and Teacher Autonomy

The shift in kindergarten to a more academic curriculum has been found to be stressful for teachers and students (Gallant, 2009). One aspect of stress kindergarten teachers face is the challenge of trying to balance a belief in child-centered Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in this high-stakes environment where they are asked to meet more standards at a quicker rate than ever before (Goldstein, 2007). These requirements to meet academic standards and the didactic methods often suggested to do this are at odds with teachers' desire to use a more balanced approach. As one kindergarten teacher stated in a 2006 study, "I think all children benefit from a more child-centered approach, but we have to do teacher-centered to get them ready for 1st grade." (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). In more recent research 200 early childhood educators were surveyed, and 85% responded that they felt required to teach in developmentally *inappropriate* ways (Carlson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015). High-stakes testing, paced curriculum, and other higher-level mandates from the district and state can result in disconnecting teachers from their sense of autonomy thus resulting in teaching in ways they know to be less effective for children's learning (Olivant, 2015).

The Role of Administration and Autonomy

Principals and other building administrators have the power to act as buffers or as amplifiers of accountability for the teachers on their staff (Minicozzi, 2011; Woody et al., 2004). How they translate and enforce higher-level mandates translates to how their staffs perceive the mandates. Principals play an active role in the decisions that result in kindergarten classroom environments, including teachers' instructional choices. Pressure

from administration to follow the district's aligned and paced curriculum with the threat of sanction or job loss is apparent in the literature. The use of walk-throughs and other methods by administrators to check that teachers were following the curriculum daily were common (Brown et al., 2015; Minicozzi, 2011). Teachers feel that their autonomy with the curriculum was connected to the discretion of the administrators (Woody et al., 2004; Strong & Yoshida, 2014) Administrators play a vital role in how kindergarten teachers instruct as well as experience feelings of autonomy.

How Teacher Autonomy Relates to Practice

Kindergarten teachers report strong beliefs in using Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in their classrooms (Minicozzi, 2011; Pepper, 2014). DAP is a framework for early childhood education that has a strong foundation in child development research. DAP takes a child-centered approach to learning that requires teachers respect the individual child's development and set expectations based on the individual child, not exterior standards. In practice DAP focuses on using play to construct knowledge, meaningful learning connected to the child's life experiences, and child-led exploration (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Accepted as best practice for early childhood educators, The National Association for the Education of Young Children's position statement written in 1986 gives educators research-based methods to use in their practice. Kindergarten teachers may believe in using best practices for their classrooms, including the use of DAP; however, the autonomy to use these practices is not always present. As Brown et al. (2015) point out, teachers in their study believed they could balance the

rigorous aligned curriculum with DAP, but the research does not support that. In fact, when observed the aligned curriculum was continually the priority.

Minicozzi's 2011 study explored how four suburban Long Island, New York kindergarten teachers adjusted to the shift from half day kindergarten to full day kindergarten and their struggle to balance increased accountability and the use of DAP. The findings included the participants reporting that the pre-packaged curriculum and pacing charts pushed more academics while lowering teacher autonomy. One of the four participants expressed that she felt kindergarten teachers had to compromise their beliefs about what was best for their students daily in order to meet job requirements. Also of interest is the finding that the actions of administrators were found to be a factor in the level of autonomy the kindergarten teachers perceived they had to use DAP in their classrooms. Participants expressed how the actions and expectations of their principals influenced their perceived levels of autonomy to use DAP in their kindergarten classrooms (Minicozzi, 2011). More recent research supports that even when administrators say they want developmentally appropriate classrooms, they are also demanding proof of learning, which for teachers translates into using more didactic methods (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

In a second qualitative study, two kindergarten teachers expressed a belief that they were given more autonomy by their principal to be flexible with their district's rigid aligned curriculum because their school was high achieving and in a higher-income area (Goldstein, 2007). Both teachers taught kindergarten in an affluent suburb in Texas; the teachers reported not being subject to close scrutiny by their district for adherence to the mandated workbooks and instructional guides. The kindergarten teachers reported that in

lower-achieving schools their colleagues did not have the flexibility they had to veer from the mandated curriculum. The high-achieving label that protected these teachers' autonomy to use DAP is linked to the high-income levels of the school community (Goldstein, 2007). A 2015 study also reported that teachers expressed the belief that the level of autonomy they were granted was directly related to the standardized test scores of the school where they taught (Olivant, 2015).

School level socioeconomic status is highly correlated to standardized test scores (White et.al, 2016), which speaks to a possible autonomy gap along income level lines. The link both of these studies make between kindergarten teachers' self-perceived autonomy and the use of DAP in kindergarten classrooms is supported in the literature by Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett (2006), who concluded in their 2006 study that increased self-perceived autonomy for kindergarten teachers results in an increase in DAP.

The relationship between kindergarten teachers' autonomy and the use of DAP in kindergarten classrooms is significant because the children who could potentially benefit from DAP most appear to have the least amount of access to it. Students of low socioeconomic status have been found to experience twice the amount of stress in developmentally inappropriate environments (Hart et. al., 1998); and at-risk students learned more in a year in classrooms rated as developmentally appropriate (Huffman & Speer, 2000). The use of DAP has positive effects, especially for lower-income students; however, low-income and students of color are more often taught in developmentally inappropriate ways (Diamond, 2007; Stipek, 2004).

Autonomy in High and Low-Income Environments

The previous research examining teacher autonomy in contrasting socioeconomic environments was limited to studying teachers in single school districts. Lepine's 2007 study compared teachers at two elementary schools in the same district, one with a Title 1 designation and the other without. The study used the Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS) to measure the self-perceived levels of autonomy of the participants. Of the 18 items that comprise the TAS the research found a significant difference between teachers in high and low socioeconomic environments in four of the items in the sphere of general autonomy. The teachers in the study had significantly different levels of autonomy with the higher-income teachers having more autonomy regarding creativity, control of learning activities, and standards of behavior. Interestingly the low-income group had significantly higher levels of self-perceived autonomy in the area of solving major problems (Lepine, 2007).

The research linking socioeconomic status and academic achievement is robust. As Georges (2009) points out, the socioeconomic background of students is a strong contributor to the achievement gap in our schools. However, family level socioeconomic status is not the only factor affecting student achievement. Sirin (2005) found that school level socioeconomic status has an even greater correlation to academic achievement. As previously stated, socioeconomic status also affects standardized test scores. In a 2016 study it was found that for every 10% increase in student participation in the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program (FRPL) there was a 5% decrease in language proficiency scores (White et al., 2016).

Socioeconomic status is defined by the American Psychological Association as a multifaceted measure encompassing income, perceptions of social status and class, and educational factors, as well as opportunities available to the individual (American Psychological Association, n.d.). For our research purposes, socioeconomic status will be defined as school level socioeconomic status as measured by school level participation in the National School Lunch Program, also known as FRPL. In the literature, the percentage of students qualifying for the National School Lunch Program is a common measure for school-level socioeconomic status (Sirin, 2005). The program uses family income to determine eligibility; students who have a family income at or below 130% of the poverty line receive free lunches while those between 130% and 185% have reduced lunch prices. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a school is labeled as high poverty if more than 75% of the students qualify for FRPL, and low if less than 25% qualify (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

The research is inconclusive as to why lower-income students are more often taught using more didactic methods although some studies have theorized that the use of didactic methods in low-income schools are in part an effort from administration and teachers to overcome the achievement gap (Chiatovich & Stipek, 2016; Early et al., 2010). Research also supports that greater pressure on low-income schools to condense instruction to literacy and math (Gluckman, 2002) as well as the use of pre-packaged and strictly aligned curriculum found in lower-performing schools (Minicozzi, 2011) push out the use of DAP and lower teachers' sense of autonomy. Socioeconomic environment is a challenge to educational equity; research supports that it also plays a role in teacher autonomy (Lepine, 2007). What is yet unclear is the scope of that influence.

Summary

In order to successfully use best practice, kindergarten teachers need to be able to use their discretion (Goldstein, 2008). The present high-stakes educational environment is stripping autonomy away from teachers with requirements such as scripted and paced curriculum (Olivant, 2015). The effects of these high-stakes measures that are associated with loss of autonomy do not seem to be felt equally across socioeconomic lines; however, previous research is limited to small studies in single school districts.

Purpose of Study

Research suggests that there are many barriers facing the implementation of this best practice framework in classrooms. One barrier that has not been deeply explored with large sample research is whether that autonomy is experienced differently for kindergarten teachers in contrasting socioeconomic status as measured by the percentage of students at the teachers' schools who are enrolled in the FRPL program.

Statement of Problem

This study examines kindergarten teachers' self-perceived level of autonomy using The Teaching Autonomy Scale developed by Pearson and Hall (1993) and compares results from participants in high and low socioeconomic schools using the FRPL participation rate of their schools as the measure. How kindergarten teachers perceive their autonomy is significant as it relates to what methods are used in their classrooms, including the amount of DAP (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Bridging the gap between the educational experiences of children in high and low socioeconomic

environments is a step that must be taken to make public education equitable; however, the inequities must first be identified before interventions can be taken.

METHOD

Participants

Kindergarten teachers were recruited for this study through the researcher's social media platforms (Appendix A). The initial response to the online survey yielded 139 volunteer participants. Participants who lived outside the United States (14), taught at schools with FRPL participation rates of 25% - 75% (33), did not complete the TAS (4), or failed to give informed consent (1) were excluded from the study. The final sample was 91 female kindergarten teachers presently teaching in high-income 47.3%, (43) and low-income 52.7%, (48) school environments in 30 states within the United States. The participants were 85.7% Caucasian (78), 7.7% Hispanic or Latino (7), 3.3% Asian (3), 2.2% American Indian or Alaskan Native (2), and 1 participant indicated "other" without further explanation of ethnicity.

Participants' highest education level was 36.6% (33) bachelor's degree, 51.6% (49) master's, 2.2% (2) doctorate, and 9.9% (9) indicated "other" which included associate's degrees, teaching credential programs, and presently being in graduate school. The participants' teaching experience was reported as 20% (18) had one to five years, 17.8% (16) had 6-10 years, 23.3% (21) had 11-15 years, 17.8% (16) had 16-20 years, and 21.1% (19) more than 20 years teaching experience.

Participants were informed that the study would be comparing the self-perceived levels of autonomy of kindergarten teachers in high and low socioeconomic school environments in the United States. The informed consent form (Appendix B) that preceded the online survey also explained to the participants that the study was

anonymous; participants could withdraw from the study at any time; and there would be no penalty for withdrawing.

Instrumentation

The Teaching Autonomy Scale (Appendix C) developed by Pearson and Hall (1993) has been previously used in studies examining teacher autonomy (Cameron, 2008; Saljoughi & Namati, 2015; Wengrowicz, 2014) including a 2007 study similar to the present study examining teacher autonomy in two high and low-poverty schools in one district (Lepine, 2007). The Teaching Autonomy Scale has been found to be reliable and valid for use in research (Pearson & Hall, 1993). In a 2005 study by Pearson and Moomaw, of the 18-item TAS the internal consistency reliability was found to be .83 (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

The TAS survey contains 18 items where participants are asked to rate their answers from 1 definitely true to 4 definitely false. The survey included statements such as, “The selection of student learning activities in my class are under my control,” and “The scheduling of use of time in my class is under my control.” The possible scores on the TAS range from 18 to 72. In addition to the TAS participants were asked demographic information including number of years teaching, highest level of education, ethnicity, location and the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program participation rate of their school.

Procedure

The study was promoted via the researcher's social media platform No Time For Flash Cards on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/notimeforflashcards>, Twitter: <http://twitter.com/NoFlashCards>, Instagram: <http://instagram.com/allienoflashcards>, and Pinterest: <http://pinterest.com/noflashcards/>, as well as with a blog post (Appendix A) on the researcher's blog: <https://www.notimeforflashcards.com> which was also sent as an email to her 28,071 email subscribers. When participants clicked the link, they were taken to the study hosted on Qualtrics. Upon opening the survey, the participants were presented with the consent form (Appendix C) and asked to agree to it by selecting yes before continuing with the survey. After completion of the survey, participants were thanked and given a link to the survey to share with other kindergarten teachers to facilitate snowball sampling. Prior approval for this study was obtained from the Missouri State University IRB (December 17, 2017; approval #2018-432).

Analysis

After the data was collected the results were scored according to the measure. Items 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, and 18 were reverse-scored, and the total autonomy score was calculated for each participant. The mean total autonomy scores for both high and low-poverty groups were analyzed with an independent t-test using SSPS, and the effect size was analyzed using Cohen's d. After comparing the overall autonomy scores for the two groups, the scores for the two spheres of teaching autonomy (curricular and general) were also summed according to the measure and compared using independent t-tests and Cohen's d. Following the analysis of the two spheres of autonomy, each item

on the measure was analyzed using independent t-tests and Cohen's d to measure effect size.

RESULTS

The data analysis found a significant difference between the self-perceived autonomy levels of kindergarten teachers in high socioeconomic environments compared to kindergarten teachers in low socioeconomic environments. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare overall kindergarten teacher self perceived autonomy in high and low-income conditions. There was a significant difference in self-perceived levels of teacher autonomy for kindergarten teachers in high-income environment ($M = 55.41$, $SD = 9.24$) and kindergarten teachers in low-income environment ($M = 45.37$, $SD = 9.92$), $t(89) = 4.981$, $p < .001$ Cohen's d effect size value ($d = 1.045$) suggests a high practical significance. These results suggest that the income level of teaching environment does have a positive relationship with kindergarten teachers' levels of overall self-perceived autonomy. Specifically, our results suggest that kindergarten teachers in higher income schools perceive higher levels of overall autonomy.

The analysis comparing the scores for the two separate spheres of autonomy; curricular and general the two groups showed similar results. There was a significant difference in the sphere of curricular autonomy showing higher levels of curricular autonomy for the teachers in the high-income group ($M = 17.06$, $SD = 4.32$) and low-income ($M = 12.87$, $SD = 4.21$), $t(89) = 4.685$, $p < .001$ Cohen's d effect size value ($d = 0.964$) suggests a high practical significance. The sphere of general autonomy was also found to have a significant difference again showing higher levels of autonomy for the higher-income teachers. The results of the independent t-test showed these results: high-income ($M = 38.34$, $SD = 5.710$) and low-income ($M = 32.50$, $SD = 6.327$), $t(89) =$

4.608, $p = < .001$ Cohen's d effect size value ($d = 0.968$). The results of all three independent t-tests are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-test Comparing Participant TAS by Group

TAS	High Income ($n = 43$)		Low Income ($n = 48$)		T	Sig	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Total	55.41	9.24	45.37	9.92	4.981	< .001	1.045
Curricular	17.07	4.32	12.87	4.08	4.913	< .001	0.984
General	38.34	6.327	32.50	6.731	4.732	< .001	0.968

The mean TAS scores for each item of the 18-item measure were analyzed using independent sample t-tests. The results found 15 out of the 18 items showed a statistically significant difference between kindergarten teachers' self-perceived autonomy in high and low socioeconomic environments. Of the 18 statements on the measure, the results from three were found not be statistically significant between teachers in high and low-income environments. These included feelings of autonomy regarding the use of alternative procedures: High-income ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .868$) low-income ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .831$); standards of behavior: High-income ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .736$) low-income ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .789$); and how classroom space is used: High-income ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .725$) low-income ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .919$).

The most significant difference between the mean scores on individual items was the ninth item that stated, “My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself.” The high-income group showed a much higher mean score than their low-income counterparts. High-income group ($M = 2.88, SD = .931$) low-income ($M = 1.88, SD = .930$) this shows a strong statistical difference between kindergarten teachers in high and low-income environments and effect size that suggests high practical significance. See Table 2 on the following page for the individual results of the analysis of every item on the 18 item TAS.

Table 2

Mean TAS Scores Per Item Grouped by High and Low Socioeconomic Environments

Survey Statement	High Income (<i>n</i> = 43)		Low Income (<i>n</i> = 48)		<i>T</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
1.Free to be creative	3.51	.688	2.88	.841	3.967	<.001	0.824
2.Activity selection	3.47	.735	2.92	.942	3.071	.003	0.647
3.Alternative procedures	3.09	.868	2.90	.831	1.107	.271	0.224
4.Behavior	3.51	.736	3.38	.789	0.851	.397	0.170
5.Discretion	3.33	.715	2.75	.812	3.571	.001	0.755
6.Guidelines	3.14	.743	2.46	.849	4.051	<.001	0.849
7.Content and skills	2.63	1.070	2.06	.979	2.636	.010	0.557
8.Class schedule	3.14	.889	2.25	1.139	4.119	<.001	0.865
9.Goals and objectives	2.88	.931	1.83	.930	5.375	<.001	1.128
10.Instruction	2.93	.910	2.40	.939	2.749	.007	0.573
11.Solving problems	2.77	.868	2.38	.937	2.065	.042	0.431
12.Teaching content	2.67	.944	1.98	.887	3.621	<.001	0.755
13.Classroom space	3.63	.725	3.42	.919	1.208	.230	0.252
14.Classroom materials	3.14	.833	2.65	.978	2.576	.012	0.537
15.Evaluation	2.44	.934	1.81	.915	3.245	.002	0.682
16.Methods	3.51	.592	3.02	.863	3.127	.002	0.656
17.Scheduling	3.02	.859	2.42	1.069	2.962	.004	0.615
18.Content choice	2.60	.955	1.90	.857	3.734	<.001	0.767

DISCUSSION

Kindergarten teacher self-perceived autonomy in contrasting socioeconomic environments is one of many areas of possible research examining the inequitable effects of the high-stakes environment in early childhood education. The present study found a significant difference in both the curricular and general spheres as well as in overall autonomy. In all of the 18-item TAS the higher-income group had higher mean TAS scores than the lower-income group of teachers, 15 of which were found to be statistically significant. This speaks to how consistent the levels of self-perceived autonomy are in high and low-income groups

The results of this study build on previous research by Lepine (2007), which found a relationship between teaching at high-poverty school and low levels of some areas of general teaching autonomy. In the 2007 study the research found significant difference in only four items of the TAS in the sphere of general teaching autonomy. Of the four items on the TAS that were found to be significant by Lepine, three were also found to be significant in the present study; however, the item that states “Standards of behavior in my classroom are set primarily by myself” was found to have a significant difference in the 2007 study only. The present study found this item to have the closest mean scores between the two groups. Zero tolerance policies, focus on bullying, and other school and district-wide behavior mandates that are more common in schools today may account for this difference in results. Behavior could be a more homogenous area for teachers as policies and behavioral practices may be similar in all income levels.

Comparing the results from the previous research and the present study, a wider autonomy gap is present. Significant differences on per item analysis of the TAS rose

from four to 15. Also the high-income group in the present study had higher general and curricular autonomy scores than the higher-income group in the existing research, gaining 1 point on the mean general autonomy score and 3.42 points for the curricular autonomy. The low-income teachers' autonomy, however, did not see similar gains. In fact, the mean score for general autonomy in the low-income group was lower in the present study, dropping from 35.12 in 2007 to a mean of 32.50 in 2018. The low-income group's curricular autonomy score dropped from 13.56 to 12.87 in the present study. This illustrates the idea that the autonomy gap is present in our kindergarten classrooms and it is widening.

The differences in the findings from 2007 and this study may be explained by the larger, more widespread sample used in the present study, how the income level groups were defined, as well as the continued academic pressure especially on lower-income schools (Bassok et.al, 2016). In the eleven years between the Lepine study and present research, the high-stakes atmosphere focused on accountability has continued to influence teachers and practice. The increase in mandates that lower-income schools are subject to appears to be a factor in the widening gap of autonomy between the two groups of kindergarten teachers.

The significant and widening difference in kindergarten teachers' self-perceived autonomy in high and low socioeconomic status schools could have many potential causes including the awareness of the achievement gap and the desire to narrow it resulting in a lack of perceived autonomy on the part of the teachers to deviate from the prescribed curriculum. Kindergarten teachers could potentially be under more pressure than other grade level teachers to prepare students for more formal learning in the

subsequent grades. Additionally, lower-income schools are more likely to have more students entering kindergarten at lower readiness levels, exacerbating this factor. The traumatic effects of poverty could also be a contributing factor facing kindergarten teachers in low-income environments, as more class time is used addressing student needs outside of the curriculum leaving little time for anything not contributing to meeting standards and expectations.

Another area to examine is the role of community and how that impacts how teachers spend their day. When a kindergarten teacher has access to parent and other community volunteers working in the classroom, activities can be more efficient, and teachers may have more flexibility with class time, which may create a greater feeling of autonomy. Families in higher-income schools may have more income and employment stability, which could increase the opportunity to volunteer in kindergarten classrooms.

The study answered the research question of whether kindergarten teachers in higher-income schools have higher levels of self-perceived autonomy, while also uncovering that this gap is widening. The autonomy gap is troubling, but when taken into account with the previous research by Parker and Newhart-Pritchett that found when kindergarten teachers perceive they have instructional autonomy more DAP is used (2006), one can conclude that the widening gap of autonomy contributes to a widening gap of instruction in high and low socioeconomic status school environments.

Further research may want to discover more about the effects and factors contributing to this autonomy gap between high and low-income school environments, specifically, research exploring the effects of socioeconomic-related working conditions such as student behavioral issues and poverty related trauma on teacher autonomy. While

years teaching and level of education did not seem to be significant factor in autonomy for the sample studied, it would be beneficial to examine the effects of child development education on kindergarten teacher autonomy levels because DAP is based on child development research. If kindergarten teachers have a strong understanding of child development could that change their perception of their own autonomy? Another area for future research would be to examine how administrative practices such as walk-throughs and classroom observation affect kindergarten teachers' sense of autonomy as well as their instructional decisions. Principals have an imperative role in teacher autonomy discovering what actions increase and which decrease teacher autonomy levels could offer opportunities for intervention.

Limitations

The electronic survey was open to anyone with the link to the survey, and as such the results are vulnerable to false reporting. Participants were recruited from the pool of readers of the researcher's blog about early childhood education, and it is possible that these participants are already highly engaged teachers with levels of autonomy greater than a true random sample, which could affect the generalizability of the results.

Conclusion

The widening gap in autonomy between kindergarten teachers in high and low-socioeconomic environments uncovered in the study is an important finding that reflects the current educational atmosphere of accountability in the United States. As more proof of learning is demanded of teachers, especially teachers in lower-income schools, less

autonomy is afforded and instructional practice is harmed in the process. Unequal levels of teacher autonomy lead to unequal use of best practices, which increases the inequity between kindergarten classrooms in high and low socioeconomic environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Recruitment Blog Post

Sample blog post for participant recruitment posted on <https://www.notimeforflashcards.com>

Are You A Kindergarten Teacher? I need your help!



As many of you know I am nearing the end of my Master's program in Early Childhood and Family Development at Missouri State University. As part of my program, I am conducting research and writing a thesis. My topic, as I have shared on and off, is related to kindergarten teachers' self-perceived levels of autonomy. I am exploring how kindergarten teachers experience autonomy in various school settings.

I am particularly interested in kindergarten teachers in high and low socioeconomic settings. This is defined as schools with less than 25% of students on the Free or Reduced Price Lunch program for high and over 75% on the program for low socioeconomic

designation. If you or someone you know is a kindergarten teacher in either of those environments I would be thrilled to have you participate or send them this link. Participation is anonymous and takes about 15 minutes. So instead of a BuzzFeed quiz, you can help me with my research!

If you have any questions before participating please contact me at Mcdonald256@live.missouristate.edu I'll be happy to answer any questions you have.

Ready to help? Click here! (link to the survey)

Appendix B. Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Missouri State University College of Education

Autonomy Gap? Exploring Kindergarten Teacher Autonomy in High and Low Socioeconomic Environments

Principal Investigator: Dr. Cemore Brigden

Co-Investigator: Allison McDonald

Introduction

You have been asked to participate in a research study that is a requirement for a Master's degree in Early Childhood and Family Development for Allison McDonald. Before you agree to participate in this study, it is important that you read and understand the study and the procedures it entails. If you have any questions about the study or your role in it, be sure to ask the investigator. If you have more questions at a later time, Dr. Cemore Brigden and Allison McDonald will be happy to answer them for you. You may contact the investigator at:

Dr. Cemore Brigden
417-836-8403
JoannaCemore@MissouriState.edu

Allison McDonald
206-851-7157
Mcdonald256@live.missouristate.edu

You will need to give us permission to be involved in the study by signing this form. If you decide to take part, and later change your mind, you may stop at any time. You do not need to have any reason for ending your participation and there will be no negative consequences for ending your participation.

Purpose of this Study

The reason for this study is to compare perceived autonomy levels of kindergarten teachers in high and low socioeconomic environments. You have been chosen to participate because you are a kindergarten teacher in the United States.

Description of Procedures

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to fill out 24-question questionnaire online that will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. To protect your privacy your name and email will not be recorded.

What are the risks?

It is not anticipated that you will experience any direct benefits from this study. Potential risks include a lack of confidentiality during the group interview. Participation in this research will help investigators identify possible inequality in teacher autonomy among kindergarten teachers in different socioeconomic environments.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your name and email address will not be gathered or appear on the questionnaires. All research from this study will be destroyed 2 years after this study ends.

Consent to Participate

If you want to participate in this study you are required to agree by filling out the yes box below as an indication of your willingness to participate.

Click here for a copy of this form

I have read and understand the information in this form. I have been encouraged to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have also been informed that I can withdraw from the study at any time. By indicating yes on this form, I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been read this agreement and been offered a copy for my own records.

This consent form was created using the template from:
http://ora.missouristate.edu/assets/ora/Sample_ICF_Template.pdf

Appendix C. Teaching Autonomy Scale

Directions: Please indicate the extent to which each of the following statements is true for you personally, using the following scale:

- 1 - Definitely True
- 2 - More or Less True
- 3 - More or Less False
- 4 - Definitely False

There are no correct answers, so mark each statement as honestly as possible, in terms of how well you feel the statement describes you and your teaching situation.

1. I am free to be creative in my teaching approach
2. The selection of student-learning activities in my class is under my control.
3. I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching.
4. Standards of behavior in my classroom are set primarily by myself.
5. My job does not allow for much discretion on my part.
6. In my teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures.
7. In my situation, I have little say over the content and skills that are selected for teaching
8. The scheduling of use of time in my classroom is under my control.
9. My teaching focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself
10. I follow my own guidelines on instruction.
11. In my situation, I have only limited latitude in how major problems are resolved.
12. What I teach in my class is determined for the most part by myself.
13. In my class, I have little control over how classroomspace is used.
14. The materials I use in my class are chosen for the most part by myself.
15. The evaluation and assessment activities used in my class are selected by people other than myself.
16. I select the teaching methods and strategies I use with my students.
17. I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my classroom.
18. The content and skills taught in my class are those I select