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NEW CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS WORKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article considers perceptions of children's learning and classroom practice to support learning in Uzbekistan early years educational context. In Uzbekistan, there is a growing focus on quality provision of early childhood education and building early childhood education teacher capacity. Over the course of one academic year, data were collected from kindergarten teachers in an urban school through interviews and classroom observations as part of a larger study. The perceptions of kindergarten children's learning and of their practice to support kindergarten children's learning, taking into consideration the gender perspective. The results showed tensions in the teachers' perceptions which contrasted between a constructivist approach and a teacher-directed skills approach. Perceptions of their practice reflected a formal, teacher-directed approach rather than a constructivist approach and a teacher-directed skills approach to teaching. Several factors, including deep-rooted perceptions as well as curriculum structure, time, number of staff and resources, contributed to this.

Keywords: teachers' perceptions, kindergarten teacher classroom practice, early childhood education, children's learning.

Currently, the Uzbekistan education system is experiencing reforms in early childhood education. In Early Childhood Education involves active learning, problem solving, critical thinking, play as well as cooperative learning and

independent discovery. There are also a variety of early childhood education resource development initiatives. In the few in-service teacher education institutions in Uzbekistan which have recently begun to address the issue of capacity development of early childhood teachers, teachers are being encouraged to use teaching strategies and resources to bring change into their practice to provide young learners with meaningful and better learning opportunities. Therefore, a key aim is for teachers to shift their current teaching which emphasizes knowledge acquisition, drill and practice and to engage young learners in constructivist learning experiences that involve direct experience, exploration, discovery, and social interaction. For such goals to be realized, how early years teachers understand children's learning is important to consider (Brownlee & Chak, 2007) because teachers' beliefs about how young children learn influence their classroom practice and curriculum decisions (MacNaughton, 2003). However, in Uzbekistan and elsewhere, early childhood teachers' understanding of learning, particularly their understanding about children's learning and how this influences their classroom practice has received little attention (Brownlee & Chak, 2007). There is thus an urgent need to consider how teachers' perceptions influence their teaching and practice with young children to inform the reform process in Uzbekistan. The goal is also engaged in enhancing the quality of early childhood education through teacher training programmes and resource development. Moreover, various international donors and financial institutions also support gender and education programmes, including teacher education for women, in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is faced with an urgent need for qualified early childhood education teachers to support children's learning in appropriate, effective ways. Presently, teacher training is not a pre-requisite for public and private sector early childhood education teachers. Teachers, usually women, with little or no higher education training, are generally hired to teach young children. High quality training in developing is also of great concern. As such, those who teach young children have

limited theoretical knowledge about child development and children's learning. Similar issues with quality, availability and effectiveness are also found in teacher training at primary and post primary levels.

While teacher decisions have been found to be based upon personal and practical knowledge rather than technical knowledge of child development and learning (Vartuli, 1999), teachers with early childhood education training are more likely to engage in developmentally appropriate practice (Breffni, 2011; File & Gullo, 2002; Han, 2009; Vartuli, 1999; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). Teachers need specialized knowledge and qualifications to teach young children. Without this, teachers are likely to rely on informal knowledge derived from their personal or other teachers' understandings and folk theories (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Vartuli, 1999), and knowledge developed through their own practice (Gholami & Husu, 2010; Vartuli, 1999). Nevertheless, teachers' beliefs have been found to have greater influence in determining their decisions and behavior than their knowledge, as new information is often filtered through personal beliefs enacted in their pedagogy (Ethell, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta & La Paro, 2006; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999). Beliefs often create barriers to change because of the complex and interdependent relationship between personal experience, identity and socio-cultural context (Raffo & Hall, 2006). Brownlee and Chak's (2007) explored student teachers' beliefs about children's learning before and after a two-week practicum experience. They found that, over the two weeks, there was an increase in beliefs about children's learning from acquisition of knowledge and facts to an active understanding of children's learning as a process of making meaning of various learning experiences. They concluded that it is, therefore, important to focus on early childhood student teachers' beliefs about children's learning because these may influence effective professional practice. As such, for teacher training and professional development to influence beliefs and shift teaching practice to effectively mediate children's learning, clear links between essential knowledge and skills and classroom practice as well as opportunities to guide

teachers to reflect upon how their beliefs inform classroom practice and to re-negotiate their beliefs about learning have been suggested (Breffni, 2011; Brownlee & Chak, 2007; Hascher, Cocard & Moser, 2004; Han, 2009). From a social constructionist and poststructuralist perspective, critical reflection of beliefs is crucial to the repositioning of teachers' understanding of appropriate learning experiences for children within diverse socio-cultural contexts (MacNaughton, 2003).

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