

A Novel Approach to Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators and Caregivers

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Background and Objectives

Early education and care systems invest heavily in professional development (PD) programs aimed at improving quality, and some PD programs have been able to improve early educator and caregiver skills. However, traditional PD approaches are often complex and resource intensive, which can limit the widespread expansion of PD to early education and care systems more broadly.

The current project considers whether an alternative approach could be used to make PD more accessible for early educators and caregivers. Specifically, this project examines the efficacy of a potentially scalable and cost-effective researcher-developed intervention – so-called Early Learning Study at Harvard (ELS@H) Bits – aimed at improving the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of early educators and caregivers working with four-year-old children across Massachusetts. The ELS@H Bits intervention involves sending educators and caregivers text messages containing actionable information on two practices: (1) using transitions as meaningful learning opportunities, and (2) encouraging children's language through open-ended questions.

Relevant Behavioral Concepts

Several key insights from behavioral economics underlie the design of the ELS@H Bits intervention. First, humans have imperfect information. In the case of educators and caregivers, there exists imperfect information about which practices are most important to implement and as such, ELS@H Bits messages provide clear signals about two key practices proposed by the field (Farran et al., 2017). Second, humans are more likely to act on proximal information. That is, educators may be more likely to incorporate novel information into their practices if that information is top of mind. ELS@H Bits makes content accessible to educators and caregivers through a common communication medium (i.e., text messages) at a time proximal to when educators interact with children (i.e., the start of the day). Third, the relevance of information to individuals' daily demands is also likely to underlie the translation of knowledge into action. The intervention offers tips that educators and caregivers may immediately employ at critical points in the day (e.g., to manage stressful transitions). Fourth, social forces support the transfer of knowledge to practice. Humans are influenced by their perceptions of what other humans do and thus the messages frame the targeted practices as commonplace among other early educators and caregivers to encourage implementation.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following two research questions:

- Does the ELS@H Bits program influence educator and caregiver knowledge, beliefs, or practices related to two key practices (i.e., making transitions meaningful learning times and encouraging children's language)?
- Does the efficacy of ELS@H Bits vary based on characteristics of the educator and caregiver (e.g., prior PD experiences) or the early education and care setting (e.g., setting type or size)?

Hypotheses

We hypothesize that the ELS@H Bits intervention will have positive impacts on educator and caregiver knowledge, beliefs, and practices related to the two emphasized dimensions of practice. We also expect that ELS@H Bits might be most impactful for educators and caregivers who have the least experience with or access to PD opportunities. In particular, we expect that educators in licensed family child care centers and community-based centers, as opposed to Head Start and public school prekindergarten programs, might be least likely to have access to other PD programs. It is therefore unlikely that these educators and caregivers will have accessed the content of the ELS@H Bits intervention through other means.

Sample

Participants for this study were drawn from the broader Early Learning Study at Harvard (ELS@H; Jones, Lesaux, Gonzalez, Hanno, & Guzman, in press). ELS@H is a longitudinal study of early learning and care in Massachusetts that is intended to yield results that are representative of the state's population of young children. A sample of 116 early educators and caregivers participating in the second year of ELS@H consented to participate in the ELS@H Bits intervention.

Methods

After consenting to participate, educators and caregivers were randomly assigned to receive the ELS@H Bits intervention or to a control group receiving no messages. Control group teachers were offered the chance to receive ELS@H Bits messages at a later point in time. A randomization schedule was created prior to recruitment to assign all educators and caregivers in the state, based on publicly available administrative records, to either the treatment or control groups. The randomization schedule was generated using a permuted-block randomization approach to ensure balance across the four types of early education and care settings considered (i.e., licensed family child care, Head Start, community-based centers, and public school prekindergartens; Li, 2011).

Outcome data used to evaluate the efficacy of the ELS@H Bits methods were gathered from two primary sources. First, at the end of the six-week intervention, educators and caregivers were prompted to complete an online survey. In the survey, they provided basic demographic information (i.e., sex, age, education experiences, prior PD experiences), as well as completed assessments related to their knowledge of and beliefs about the targeted practices. Second, information about the practices of educators and caregivers were collected through observations conducted by trained observers visiting the early education and care settings. Both the survey and observations were part of the typical study procedures of the broader Early Learning Study.

Practice and Policy Implications

The results of this study will contribute to the literature on professional development for early educators and caregivers, as well as to the broader literature on text messaging interventions. If the text messages shift educators' and caregivers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices, it would suggest that using text messaging may offer an additional avenue for supporting early educators and caregivers.

References

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