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Preschool Teachers' Beliefs and Practice Regarding Emergent Literacy in a Post-Stagnation Period: The Case of Uzbekistan

Abstract: After 25 years of stagnation, Uzbekistan's educational system is currently undergoing significant reforms. This study is probably the first research on preschool teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy in Uzbekistan. We adapted the Preschool Literacy Survey (Norway) model and surveyed preschool teachers in the Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan before and after our short-term training programme. Findings demonstrated much uncertainty in teachers' beliefs and a mismatch between their practice and best research-based standards, as measured by descriptive statistics. Although the training improved some indices in their beliefs and practice, the overall assessment result of most teachers was still unsatisfactory. Our analysis attributes this to the lack of high-quality research-based training programmes on emergent literacy, teachers' misconception of their role in developing emergent literacy, the absence of emergent literacy-oriented environments and curricula and an immature publishing industry for children in Uzbekistan. This case shows that rapid educational reforms after a long stagnation may fail if teachers' beliefs and practice are not considered and improved accordingly.

Keywords: preschool teachers, emergent literacy, beliefs, practice, assessment

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Introduction

The last two to three decades have been characterised by extensive research on early childhood development. One of the indices of early childhood development is literacy. Today, literacy is not only the ability to read and write, but rather a plurality of skills in the use of different communication modes (Djonov et al. 2018). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as follows: »Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.« (UNESCO 2018)

Early childhood literacy can be developed through a child's perception of books, letters, symbols, illustrations and stories. The degree of early childhood literacy impacts a child's future school performance, which is especially obvious in low-income countries (Barnett 2001).

According to the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, reading and writing skills start to develop long before formal education in school, which proves the significance of the preschool period in the formation of emergent literacy. A child who is not equipped with sufficient literature experience in the preschool period will most likely have serious problems in reading and writing later on (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children 1998). In addition, high-quality childcare experiences with feature-responsive, stimulating environments provide a protective mechanism for children from disadvantaged home environments, resulting in higher scores on tests of language development and cognitive functioning compared with similar children without this kind of childcare experience (Weitzman and Greenberg 2002). Caregivers and educators can actively help babies become early booklovers (Neuman and Roskos 1997).

Emergent literacy should develop not in formal circumstances, but in a natural social environment where a child can explain for him/herself the concepts of

books and records by interacting with a print-rich environment and with people who engage them in literacy events (Kantor et al. 1992).

It has been asserted that what children learn about language and literacy in the early years facilitates their acquisition of formal reading skills, such as decoding, comprehension and fluency, when they begin reading instruction in school (Whitehurst and Lonigan 1998). The poor first-step reader almost always continues to be a poor reader (Francis et al. 1998).

In preschools, children's literacy is affected by preschool teachers' beliefs, among other things (Mills and Clyde 1991), as teachers' beliefs influence their practice, which in turn influence child outcomes (Foote et al. 2004; Brownlee and Berthelsen 2006). Highly qualified preschool teachers with corresponding beliefs can provide more individualised and responsive learning opportunities for children (Espinosa and Linda 2002).

Often deep-seated old-fashioned teachers' beliefs preventing effective reforms are the result of the lack of modern educational programmes and training systems for early educators (Mraz et al. 2009). This is especially true for low-income countries that usually do not have an appropriate literacy environment and cannot afford high-cost educational programmes and training systems (Duncan and Magnuson 2003).

Uzbekistan, a lower-middle income country in Central Asia (World Bank 2019), had a closed economy and a stagnated education system for 25 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, with underdeveloped preschools (World Bank Education Sector 2019). However, there has been radical change since the election of a new president in December 2016. In particular, Uzbekistan is transforming into an open economy and undergoing large-scale reforms in education and other spheres.

This article aims to provide an empirical analysis of preschool teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy in Uzbekistan. For this purpose, we first examine the current preschool system and related reforms in Uzbekistan to get an overall picture of the status quo. Next, we use an adapted version of a certain international assessment tool (survey) in preschools in a specific region of Uzbekistan. This assists in determining teachers' beliefs, practice and dynamics regarding emergent literacy using descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis. In the case of Uzbekistan, we argue that when a country is switching from one regime to another, it is very important to evaluate and influence teachers' beliefs and practice to advance successful educational reforms.

The Current Situation in Uzbekistan's Preschool System

The roots of early childhood literacy in Uzbekistan go back to the Soviet schools of early childhood education. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan undertook certain reforms in the educational system, including in preschool education, but those reforms were largely ineffective because of economic and social problems and the absence of an international-level assessment system in the country for more than two decades. As a result, the existing system

lost most of the positive aspects of the Soviet-style education and failed to catch up with modern research-based standards in education.

Since 2017, the Uzbek authorities have been carrying out radical reforms in many fields. The preschool education reforms have resulted in the adoption of 27 regulatory documents on improving the legal framework and the material and technical base of preschool educational institutions; a significant increase in the number of private preschool educational institutions to 568 and of public-private preschool educational institutions to 741; the ongoing digitalisation of the entire preschool educational system; a doubling of the basic salary rates of preschool teachers; a reduction in preschool teachers' reporting and so on (Ministry of Preschool Education 2019). Children's enrolment rate in preschools rose from 29% in 2017 to 52% in 2019 and is planned to increase to 100% for children aged 6–7 by 2022. More than 9,000 preschool staff were retrained. Because of the low proportion of preschool teachers with higher education (approximately 9% nationwide), the Uzbek government initiated the opening of new institutions for educating preschool teachers.

Importantly, the government established the Ministry of Preschool Education that currently actively interacts with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, Puchon University (South Korea), Japan International Cooperation Agency, Korea International Cooperation Agency and others. In December 2016, the government approved the »Program for Further Improvement of the Preschool Education System from 2017 through 2021« to improve the quality of preschool education. In addition, the budget for preschool facilities was tripled compared to the pre-reform period (Ministry of Preschool Education 2019).

In 2018, the Ministry of Preschool Education of Uzbekistan, UNICEF and Puchon University jointly worked out a state standard of preschool education that, for the first time in Uzbekistan, is conceptually based on children's five development indices: physical development, socio-emotional development, literacy, creative development and cognitive development. In 2019, the government adopted the concept of preschool system development until 2030, with the goal of ensuring that all children have access to high-quality preschool education. In the same year, the parliament adopted the *Law on Preschool Education*, marking the first time that Uzbek legislators focused on preschool education per se, separating it from school education and recognising the specifics of preschool institutions. The law in question officially introduced a new concept of inclusive preschool education that embraces children with special needs.

Despite these measures, the World Bank observed that the current Uzbek education system has many persistent gaps, calling for extensive research on preschool education. For example, preschool teachers' assessment (known as "attestation") is based on the old educational standards inherited from the former Soviet system. The State Inspection for Supervision of Quality of Education under the Cabinet of Ministers is in charge of the measurement of quality in preschools, but this basically concerns technical equipment and technical requirements for utilities, water supply and other physical amenities. The existing Soviet-style system of preschool teacher assessment (or "attestation") consists of two steps: (i) subject-knowledge testing

in which expert groups assess a teacher's professional knowledge; (ii) assessment of a teacher's skills, social and political knowledge and ICT skills. For the second step, evaluation instruments include an interview, group analysis, classroom observations, student performance evaluations, assessment of the use of tools and teaching learning materials and assessment of pedagogical skills (e.g., the use of interactive teaching methods, practical games, etc.). This evaluation system has certain drawbacks. Specifically, attestations take place every five years, so ineffective preschool teachers can remain in preschools affecting children's learning for several years before concrete action is taken (World Bank Group 2019). In addition, the present system does not provide any information about the validity of assessment, and attestation questions do not allow for the verification of teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy. As a result, it is difficult to assess the impact of ongoing reforms on educational processes and the quality of teaching in preschools. Therefore, different methodologies of evaluating preschool teachers urgently need to be developed, with results that could be immediately reflected in reforms in this field.

Furthermore, the *National Assessment of Learning Outcomes of Primary School Graduates* conducted by the World Bank's 2013 survey¹ in Uzbekistan found that student performance in native language was significantly higher for students who had attended at least one year of preschool. Students who had attended preschool for two years scored almost 20 points higher in native language than students who had not. However, the average performance of students in primary schools was still low, as they were not able to correctly respond to at least 50% of the tested content in native language and reading. Joint research by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education revealed below-average results in reading for 40% of primary school students (World Bank Education Sector 2019). We can assume that these numbers are at least partly attributable to the low level of emergent literacy in preschools, as there is a direct link between emergent literacy and literacy in primary schools.

Method

Many advanced countries pay particular attention to assessing preschool teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy. Unfortunately, these aspects have never been seriously taken into account in Uzbekistan, neither in the stagnation period nor in the recent period of ongoing reforms. Therefore, the goal of this study is to show the role of assessing preschool teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy in identifying the gaps and problems to be addressed by reforms. This is especially relevant to countries such as Uzbekistan that shift from one long-lasting system to another (e.g., from the Soviet to a post-Soviet system) or from a stagnated system to a rapidly transforming one.

According to the World Bank, Uzbekistan should now focus on retraining in-service teachers (rather than pre-service teachers), following a well-proven ped-

¹ This is the most recent and the only survey that the World Bank has so far conducted in Uzbekistan on this topic.

agogical technique. Such retraining is impossible without proper tools for assessing preschool teachers. Assessment is the gathering of information that helps in making informed instructional decisions on early childhood education, among other things (Snow et al. 2008). It can also indicate the effectiveness of ongoing early childhood education reforms (Bowman et al. 2001), which stresses the importance of such assessment to educational policymaking.

In this study, we adapt an international assessment tool to an Uzbek region's preschools in order to identify the level of today's preschool teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy in children aged 3–5. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to measure preschool teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy in Uzbekistan. We hope that this study can open the door to extensive use of such assessment in Uzbekistan and other countries in a similar situation. In order to assess preschool teachers, we use a survey. Surveys are widely used in educational research for descriptive and explanatory purposes.

Survey Design

For the purpose of this analysis, we use Norway's Preschool Literacy Survey (PLS) as a template for our survey. This survey was introduced in 2014 and has been used in Norwegian preschools for determining preschool teachers' beliefs and practice (Sandvik et al. 2014). With the PLS, we can find answers to our questions of interest, namely: preschool teachers' beliefs about their role in improving emergent literacy, the correlation between existing beliefs and research-based ones, and teachers' practice regarding sharing reading and writing with children aged 3–5. With this survey, we intend to show that old-fashioned preschool teachers' beliefs are one of the main barriers to improving the preschool educational system in Uzbekistan, despite ongoing reforms.

Because teachers' beliefs and practice differ from country to country, the survey should be adapted to local conditions (OECD 2009). We are unaware of previous instances of the PLS being adapted. We organised pilot tests in which we adapted the PLS by introducing some modifications according to the factor analysis. To meet the needs of the local language, we conducted back and forth translation. We adapted design components and reduced the level of difficulty, as this was the first time the participants had taken part in a survey assessing their beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy. Therefore, we excluded questions that were too specific and required the use of more advanced curricula and materials. In order to link to the national curriculum, we modified some categories. Then, the reliability of each modified category was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Five scales were reliable (see Table 2).

Our survey was conducted anonymously. It consisted of two sections: "beliefs" and "practice". Following the pilot tests, we eliminated the category "the role of preschool" from the original PLS version, because Uzbek teachers have always been under strict control by upper institutions, so they are not prepared to inde-

pendently assess the role of preschools. We merged the literacy practice categories “phonological awareness”, “literacy in play”, “letter knowledge”, “emerging reading” and “quality of shared book reading”, because we assumed that at this stage the surveyed teachers did not have any understanding of the modern concept of emergent literacy (due to the long stagnation period) and that, as a result, we could not have a broad picture of their literacy practice.

In earlier research, it was observed that Uzbekistan does not have systematised standards for creating, illustrating, wording and technical specifications of children’s books (Muminova 2019). For this reason, we constructed additional questions to uncover teachers’ beliefs about these points.

The “beliefs” section consisted of 26 statements designed to indicate preschool teachers’ beliefs about (i) the role of preschool teachers in promoting emergent literacy in children aged 3–5 years; (ii) consistency with modern emergent literacy concepts among children aged 3–5 years old; and (iii) knowledge about concepts of high-quality children’s books. As a result, the “beliefs” section was categorised as follows:

- The role of the teacher (10 questions);
- Consistency with modern concepts² (10 questions);
- Concepts of children’s books (6 questions).

The “practice” section contained 32 statements to determine preschool teachers’ practices that promote emergent literacy among children aged 3–5 years old, including (i) activities showing the quality of shared book reading, using literacy in play and phonological awareness; (ii) general indication of the amount of time that preschool teachers spend on emergent literacy activities every day; and (iii) emerging writing. They were categorised as follows:

- Quality of shared book reading (15 questions);
- Quantity of time (9 questions);
- Writing (8 questions).

The answers for each question were arranged on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “mostly disagree” to “mostly agree”, with “neutral” in the middle of the scale. More “mostly agreed” answers are evidence that teachers have high-quality beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy, with the exception of two questions, where the opposite is true. In the category “quantity of time”, the answers were spread from 0 to 20 minutes at intervals of 5 minutes, as in the original PLS.

Sample

To see the functionality of the assessment, we carried out a survey with preschool teachers in Uzbekistan’s Surkhandarya region. The World Bank considers

² Modern concepts here are those that are based on the latest research on emergent literacy.

Surkhandarya as an Uzbek region most “in need” (World Bank Group 2018). It is also considered as one of the worst performing regions in preschool education (Ministry of Preschool Education 2019).

By conducting the survey, we intended to ensure that the assessment would demonstrate the growth and development of the teacher, be varied and contain evidence of both process and product, as was recommended in the previous literature (Valencia and Pearson 1987).

The preschool teachers in our survey were retrained using a 60-page training material written by the author and based on the latest research in the field of emergent literacy. This material is a shortened version of an earlier methodological toolkit drafted by the author together with the Ministry of Education of Uzbekistan. This material provides preschool teachers with information about new concepts of emergent literacy and best international practices on emergent literacy.

In each Uzbek preschool, there is a methodologist – a person who works, on a permanent basis, with teachers to explain to them new rules, policies and methods regarding the preschool education system and practice. He or she also organises training on methodological toolkits. Methodologists in the surveyed preschools were provided with the above material, so that they could train the teachers on a voluntary basis. The survey was held before and after the training, with the response rate being 81%. The survey was done through paper-based multiple-choice questionnaires ($n = 58$), where the participants ($n = 26$) had to circle the appropriate answer.

With this survey we wished to address the following: (i) determining the quality and direction of teachers' beliefs and practice regarding emergent literacy; (ii) identifying factors affecting the level of children's literacy in preschools; (iii) establishing the link between teachers' beliefs and current reforms in preschool education; and (iv) singling out the main components that should be included in preschool teachers' retraining programmes on emergent literacy development in Uzbekistan.

Results

Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables, including mean and standard deviation. The reliability of each category was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. We also calculated Pearson's coefficient for the correlation between teachers' beliefs and practice. By using a t-test, we wished to verify whether possessing a bachelor's degree impacts the survey's overall result.

The participants in our survey were preschool teachers (aged 26–50) of children aged 3–5 who had work experience falling within the stagnation period. All participants were women, and only 11% of them had a bachelor's degree. In Uzbekistan, there are two types of educational degrees for preschool teachers:

- College degree (awarded by specialised two-year-training institutions);
- Bachelor's degree (awarded by higher education institutions with three- or four-year programmes).

The answers did not vary significantly by teachers' age and work experience, so we excluded the latter's impact from further analysis.

The adapted version of the survey demonstrated the reliability of the test, as shown in Table 1 by category.

Concept	Category	Cronbach's alpha in pilot study	Cronbach's alpha in PLS
Belief	Role of preschool teacher	.81	.80
Belief	Consistency with modern concepts	.82	.72
Belief	Concepts of children's books	.58	.69
Practice	Quality of shared reading	.71	.84
Practice	Quantity of time	.70	.83
Practice	Writing	.74	.75

Table 1: Reliability coefficient for belief and practice scales

The largely altered category "concepts of children's books" showed low reliability ($\alpha = .58$), so we did not use it further. However, we do believe that this factor is worth considering in the future, as it will help find ways of developing the children's book industry in Uzbekistan, which is currently not mature and below international standards.

Concept	Category	Mean (SD) (Bachelor's degree)	Mean (SD) (College degree)
Beliefs	Role of preschool teacher	3.30 (1.09)	2.41 (1.10)
	Consistency with modern concepts	3.63 (0.72)	2.47 (1.10)
Practice	Quality of shared reading	3.21 (1.05)	2.54 (1.05)
	Quantity of time	4.26 (0.45)	3.03 (1.13)
	Writing	4.00 (1.25)	2.81 (1.17)

Table 2: Preschool teachers' beliefs and practice means and standard deviations before training

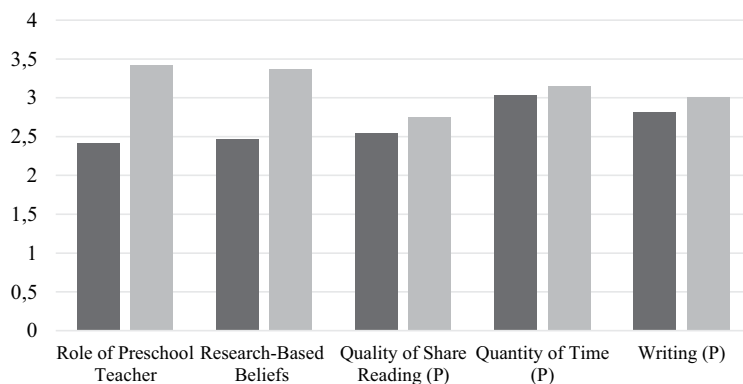
As Table 3 shows, teachers' beliefs and practice among participants with a college degree were mostly negative or neutral. Teachers with a bachelor's degree demonstrated positive beliefs and close to strongly positive practice, with a remarkable "quantity of time" category. The difference between the two was significant ($p = .0006$). In this context, it should be recalled that only 9% of preschool teachers in Uzbekistan have a bachelor's degree.

Concept	Category	Mean (SD) (Bachelor's degree)	Mean (SD) (College degree)
Beliefs	Role of preschool teacher	4.40 (0.50)	3.42 (1.02)
	Research-based	3.90 (0.92)	3.37 (1.02)
Practice	Quality of shared reading	3.71 (0.94)	2.75 (1.05)
	Quantity of time*	4.40 (0.50)	3.15 (1.10)
	Writing	4.58 (0.49)	3.01 (1.11)

Table 3: Preschool teachers' beliefs and practice means and standard deviations after training

After our training, the surveyed participants showed an increase in their beliefs towards positive, while their practice remained almost the same as before (see Table 4). As for teachers with a bachelor's degree, their beliefs and practice were improved, and the difference between them and college-degree teachers remained high ($p = .003$).

The category change dynamics before and after the training are shown in Graf 1. Here, we can see the contribution of the training to improving teachers' beliefs, rather than their practice.



Graf 1: Category changes before and after training

Pearson's coefficient demonstrated a moderate positive correlation between beliefs and practice after the training ($p = .003$, $r = .55$) and an almost strong positive correlation before the training ($p = .0002$, $r = .68$).

A principal component analysis was conducted to find meaningful factors. A two-factor solution was provided as "practice" (73.8% of the total variances) and "beliefs" (14.7% of the total variances). It was determined that "writing" was inversely associated with "shared book reading". As expected, teachers' beliefs load on their practice. Most likely, the lack of appropriate beliefs of teachers regarding section "consistency with modern concepts" impacts teachers' overall practice in preschools.

Discussion

Teachers' Beliefs

The role of the teacher

The survey showed that teachers' beliefs about their role in encouraging literacy among children aged 3–5 was close to negative. They believed that literacy in this age was not so important. Interestingly enough, the surveyed teachers did not consider that they should contribute to developing a literacy-rich environment, even though the latter is a key factor in building emergent literacy (Puranik et al. 2011). The likely reason for this could be the inherited Soviet educational mindset of associating early literacy with writing and reading, as generally understood, mostly from the age of 5 onwards (Usova 1981). This implies that retraining teachers to understand the concept of emergent literacy – going beyond just writing and reading and covering ages from birth onwards – will enable a shift in their practice. Another possible reason is that, during the last 25 years of stagnation in Uzbek education, teachers mostly implemented the guidelines from controlling institutions (top-down implementation) rather than directly engaging in improving the educational processes (bottom-up initiatives). In fact, the quality of education increases with self-engagement of all participants in the process, including teachers, children and parents (Munez et al. 2017).

Consistency with modern concepts

Contrary to the modern understanding of emergent literacy, the survey participants could not associate children under five years old with independent reading. Their replies were close to negative in the category about the relation between children and books without teachers' involvement (i.e., when a child can choose and use a book as both an educational and entertaining tool at any time he/she wishes, express his/her positive or negative feelings towards a book and “read” a book just by looking at illustrations). In fact, “reading” by children at an early age, when they do not know the letters yet, means physical interaction with any printed material (Solity et al. 2000).

The survey results showed expressly that teachers' beliefs were far from accepting the notion of introducing books of various genres to children. This can be interpreted as the result of an immature book industry for children in Uzbekistan that has offered predominantly fairy tales and folklore to children aged 3–5. However, we know that variety and richness of content leads to children having a positive attitude towards books (Ghalebandi and Noorhidawati 2019).

Overall assessment

The survey showed that the teachers had misconceptions about emergent literacy. Their beliefs were far from research-based concepts. It is noteworthy that teachers' beliefs in our survey have changed even with the short-term training programme that was based on the materials summarising the latest research on early literacy in an attractive, reader-friendly and easy-to-follow form. The materials presented in this way were especially helpful for the participants, the majority of whom obtained below-bachelor's education during the stagnation period.

Teachers' Practice

Quality of shared book reading

The category "shared book reading quality" demonstrated a weak degree of alignment with best practices. It was predictable that teachers' practice in shared book reading would be poor. The results reveal that reading in preschools consisted of one-way delivery of book content by teachers, with children being passive listeners. However, the participants with bachelor's degrees were closer to the correct research-based view. In fact, shared book reading should present opportunities for children to interrupt, comment, ask and communicate with the teacher while reading (Ledger and Merga 2018), because this way of reading is most beneficial to children (Philips et al. 2008).

In addition, the survey suggests that the teachers did not consider reading as a tool of developing code-related, vocabulary, phonological, social and language skills. Contrary to the teachers' perceptions, the literature points out that reading at an early age greatly impacts children's later reading development (Lonigan et al. 2000). Furthermore, children's interactions through reading promote their language and literacy skills (Wasik and Bond 2001).

Some participants scored low in the emotion-related subscale, as they believed that books were merely learning materials rather than tools for children's self-expression. Their low score in illustration-related questions can be attributed to the low quality of local printed materials lacking illustrations. However, illustrations are one of the most important factors in children's books in creating emotional and visualisation experiences (Kucirkova 2019).

Because our training had virtually no effect in this category, there is a need for serious work to improve the quality of children's book printing and supplies. For this, all publishers in Uzbekistan could establish a joint association whose mission would consist of developing appropriate standards for children's books. To this end, they should collaborate with teachers, child psychologists, illustrators and other specialists. This collaboration requires research-based approaches to determining children's interaction with books (Strouse et al. 2018), their cognitive development and the market, working with teachers and parents and developing book genres.

Quantity of time

Our results showed that teachers usually spent around 10 minutes on literacy-related activities.³ The participants with bachelor's degrees had better results, close to the best practice indicator – 20 minutes. Unfortunately, answers showed passive involvement of teachers in phonological and alphabet activities. This can probably be explained by teachers' beliefs that these activities are suitable for older children or speech therapy (logopedic) classes. In contrast, developing phonological skills even at an early age is very productive (Kenner et al. 2017). The answers regarding shared reading practice were significantly heterogeneous, which may influence the overall literacy practice (Kent et al. 2012).

Our training did not impact practice in this category, with the likely reason being that the national preschool curriculum does not allow sufficient time for literacy-oriented activities. Thus, the curriculum should be revised. Brodin and Renblat (2014) suggest conducting periodic revisions to either provide more time for these activities or improve overall time management. Often it is limited time that prevents educators from implementing best practices when teaching reading and writing (McKinnon 2017).

Writing

Overall, preschool teachers had very low practice regarding children's writing development in the early years, probably because they did not have strong belief in the importance of supporting children's writing at this age. Some preschool teachers could have misconceptions about "writing", which actually includes experimenting with writing tools and materials, and using scribbles, shapes, pictures and letters to represent objects and stories, which are important for developing emergent writing (MacKenzie 2011). However, teachers with bachelor's degrees demonstrated a level close to best practice. The most predictable outcome was that the answers on the classroom writing environment were negative, although it has been proved that the writing environment is important in developing early writing skills (Zhang et al. 2014). Unfortunately, the newly built or renovated preschools in Uzbekistan tend to care more about maintaining clean and neat rooms than ensuring a writing-stimulating environment for children. These findings point to the need to retrain teachers on conceptual and procedural aspects of writing.

³ Because early literacy is generally perceived in Uzbekistan as formal reading and writing, symbolic play, routine activities, language development and other similar activities under the preschool curriculum for children aged 3–5 are mostly aimed at cognitive, social and physical development rather than emergent literacy.

Overall assessment

As is evident from the above, teachers' practice turned out to be far from best practices. To improve this status quo, long-term conceptual knowledge training should be introduced to provide more flexibility in developing literacy among children aged 3–5, as recommended by Hindman and Wasik (2008). Next, preschools should be provided with higher quality print materials that, according to research, would help improve literacy-related activities (Cunningham 2010). Finally, there is a need for a step-by-step research-based programme for teachers' self-education aimed at improving the emergent literacy skills of children, as the latest studies suggest revisiting old models of emergent literacy development (Rohde 2015).

Limitations

Questionnaires provide a starting point for delving deeper into trends that may exist (Nardi 2006). This study could not cover a wider geography for surveying. Our immediate goal was to determine the basic level of preschool teachers' beliefs and practice in the post-stagnation period in a low-performing region of Uzbekistan so as to extend this analysis in future research.

The other limitation is that surveys are by nature less effective than interviews in terms of explaining concepts. For example, the question "should a child aged 3–4 be involved in writing?" could be answered negatively by Uzbek teachers if they have an old-fashioned understanding of writing.

Nevertheless, this survey, the first of its kind in the Surkhandarya region and most likely in Uzbekistan as a whole, succeeded in revealing the essence of teachers' beliefs and practice.

In the future, a closer examination of a wider scope of preschool teachers' beliefs and practice together with teachers' interviews may prove beneficial for further research and survey design modifications.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first time in Uzbekistan that a validated survey analysis has been used to determine the level of preschool teachers' beliefs and the quality of their practice regarding the modern concept of emergent literacy.

Our research shows that the surveyed teachers have an apparent lack of awareness of recent research concerning literacy development in young children. In most instances, the teachers in this study appeared to expect emergent literacy – which they understood to be limited to reading and writing – to develop in children of aged 5 years and older. We can conclude that, with such beliefs and practice, there is a need to improve preschool teachers' training programmes and preschool curricula for better implementation of the current policies in this field. We strongly

recommend that (re)training programmes pay more attention to analysing preschool teachers' beliefs and practice.

According to the literature, (re)training can support changes in practice when integrated with improving other factors (Kagan 1992). In our case, the improvement in teachers' beliefs was not reflected in their practice, probably because of factors such as the lack of high-quality print materials in Uzbekistan meeting best practice standards and the lack of time for literacy-oriented activities. This reveals the need to improve the system of publishing children's books and to reschedule literacy development activities.

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Dinara MUMINOVA (Inštitut za prekvalifikacijo in dodatno usposabljanje pedagoških delavcev v vrtcih, Uzbekistan)

PRAKSE IN PREPRIČANJA VZGOJITELJEV PREDŠOLSKIH OTROK O PORAJAJOČI SE PISMENOSTI V POSTSTAGNACIJSKEM OBDOBJU: PRIMER UZBEKISTAN

Povzetek: Po 25 letih stagnacije je uzbekistanski izobraževalni sistem trenutno deležen pomembnih reform. Raziskava, ki jo predstavljamo v tem prispevku, je ena prvih, ki ugotavlja, kakšna so prepričanja uzbekistanskih vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok in njihove vzgojne prakse, povezane z razumevanjem koncepta porajajoče se pismenosti. V ta namen smo prilagodili norveški vprašalnik o pismenosti v predšolskem obdobju in ga uporabili pri vzgojiteljih v uzbekistanski regiji Surkhandarya, in sicer pred in po izvedbi krajšega programa usposabljanja.

Ugotavljamo, da so vzgojitelji razmeroma negotovi pri razmislekih o porajajoči se pismenosti in da obstaja razkorak med njihovimi praksami ter praksami, ki so jih kot dobre prepoznale nekatere raziskave. Čeprav je usposabljanje, ki smo ga izvedli, prineslo nekatere izboljšave, rezultati na splošni ravni za večino učiteljev niso zadovoljujoči. To pripisujemo zlasti pomanjkanju kakovostnih in na raziskavah utemeljenih programov usposabljanja o porajajoči se pismenosti, ki bi jih morali biti deležni vzgojitelji, njihovim zgrešenim predstavam o lastni vlogi v teh procesih, odsotnosti stimulativnega okolja, ki bi spodbujalo porajajočo se pismenost ter neustreznim kurikularnim podlagam. Intenzivne izobraževalne reforme po dolgem obdobju stagnacije so lahko zato neuspešne, zlasti če zaobidejo subjektivna prepričanja in ustaljene prakse vzgojiteljev.

Ključne besede: vzgojitelji v predšolski vzgoji, porajajoča se pismenost, prepričanja, prakse, vrednotenje

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