

## **How does teaching experience affect attitudes towards literacy learning in the early years?**

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Teachers bring a complex array of beliefs and attitudes to the teaching of literacy. The purpose of the study reported in this article was to investigate the nature of teacher attitudes towards the learning and teaching of writing in the first year of school and to identify any broad underlying attitudinal dimensions. The secondary aim was to examine the influence of experience on these attitudinal dimensions. Government school teachers (n=228), from two Australian states, were surveyed using an instrument consisting of attitude statements which related to the learning and teaching of early literacy and more specifically early writing. An exploratory factor analysis was undertaken which indicated that, although most items appeared to be unrelated, a set of eight items coalesced to form a scale referred to as Teacher Attitudes towards Language, Thinking and Scaffolding. Analyses of variance were conducted to examine the relationship between teaching experience in general as well as specific early years teaching experience with the teacher attitude measure as the dependent variable. General teaching experience was not found to be significantly related to teacher attitude but increased amounts of early years teaching experience were found to significantly relate to support for a Vygotskian approach to the learning and teaching of writing in the first year of school. The outcomes identify the potential impact of accrued early years experience on teacher attitudes towards the learning and teaching of literacy to young children. While many of the teacher attitudes appeared to be disparate, the identified dimension indicates that there may be a consistent pattern of attitudes related to a Vygotskian approach to learning and teaching early writing. A second implication may be that longer periods of early years teaching experience may foster positive attitudes towards a Vygotskian teaching approach more quickly than general teaching experience in other settings.

### **Introduction**

The purposes of this article are to investigate the nature of teacher attitudes to the learning and teaching of early writing and to examine the influence of teaching experience on these attitudes. The article begins with a contextualisation of the issues under consideration. The work of Vygotsky provides the theoretical framework for the discussion of learning and teaching generally and literacy and writing more specifically. Literature relating to teacher beliefs and attitudes, early literacy learning, and early writing is then provided prior to a methodology section. Next, the findings are introduced, followed by a discussion of these findings and their implications.

The data discussed in this article originate from a program of research which examines the learning and teaching of writing in the first year of school. This research program addresses a number of questions, although the discussion here is limited to the attitudes of Kindergarten/Preparatory teachers towards the learning and teaching of early writing and the link between such attitudes and accrued teaching experience. Attitudes were defined as “evaluated beliefs which predispose the individual to respond a preferential

way” (Burns, 1997, p. 456). The attitudes were identified through a survey conducted in late 2008.

It has been argued that “beliefs elicited through questionnaires may reflect teachers’ theoretical or idealistic beliefs – beliefs about what should be”, while “actual classroom practice may be more rooted in reality...and reflect teachers’ practical or experiential knowledge” (Phipps & Borg, 2009, p. 382). However, this does not appear to be a serious problem as previous studies using survey methods to examine teachers’ literacy practices are substantiated by findings from observational research (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007).

The survey used in the present study provided an opportunity for Kindergarten/Preparatory teachers to respond to statements about the learning and teaching of literacy, and specifically early writing, from a variety of perspectives. Some teachers believe that literacy learning is skills-based and subsequently they teach literacy using traditional teacher-directed, didactic approaches (Stipek, 2004). Other teachers use a socio-cultural framework to form the basis of their teaching program (McNaughton, 2002). This framework takes account of the many factors that shape classroom learning. Of course, many teachers apply elements of both approaches. The attitudinal statements appearing in the survey reflected differing perspectives and were gleaned from a variety of sources, trialled with a small group of teachers, refined, and then used in a study with 89 teachers in 2007. The survey was subsequently revised before its use in the study discussed here.

## **Background**

### **A Vygotskian approach to learning and teaching**

There are a few assumptions, derived from Vygotskian theory, underlying the work described in this article. Firstly, that children develop a number of culturally transmitted mental tools through their interactions with more experienced ‘others’; in this case teachers. Secondly, that literacy is identified as one of these tools (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). Thirdly, that the teachers’ role is not just about direct teaching of facts or skills; rather it involves enabling children to use culturally transmitted mental tools independently and creatively. Vygotskian theory stipulates the essential role of mediating agents (in this case teachers), in the development of children’s higher mental processes. As such, construction of knowledge cannot be separated from its social context: in this case, the classroom. Within the classroom, what teachers attend to (or neglect) in relation to literacy generally, and writing specifically, will influence what knowledge children construct about literacy and writing. “The teacher’s ideas mediate what and how the child will learn; they act as a filter in a sense, determining which ideas the student will learn” (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 9). Instruction according to Vygotsky (1987), contributes to cognitive development by moving “ahead of development, pushing it further and eliciting new formations” (p. 198). Therefore teachers’ attitudes towards the learning and teaching of writing will determine what they choose to focus on, how they interact with children, and consequently what opportunities their charges will be afforded and what responses will be rewarded.

### **Why is literacy learning such a 'big ticket' item?**

Success with language and literacy is fundamental to children's academic development and achievement (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002). To be literate, is to have access to significant amounts of knowledge stored in coded form (Egan & Gajdamaschko, 2003). However, the process is complex, and involves developing the "skills and knowledge to create, locate, analyse, comprehend and use a variety of written, visual, aural and multi-modal texts for a range of purposes, audiences and contexts" (Wing Jan, 2009, p. 3). Early reading and writing experiences work in concert with oral language experiences, play, music, and art to support the early learner to "create his[/her] own network of competencies which power subsequent independent literacy learning" (Clay, 1991, p. 1). However, children can begin to disconnect from literacy learning as early as the first year of school. Rationalisations made by practitioners for these disconnections often refer to children's intelligence, family background, or socio-economic status (D'Anguilli, Siegel, & Hertzman, 2004).

Teaching literacy is particularly challenging at a time when a range of views flourish on how to promote literacy learning and teaching (Taylor, 2007). Shifting understandings of literacy and multi-literacies make it increasingly difficult for teachers to know how to approach the teaching of literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; McDougall, 2010). An institutional and political push for formal literacy instruction and testing in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Genishi & Dyson, 2009) has impacted on literacy instruction in classrooms with a press for more formalised approaches to instruction.

In Australian classrooms, literacy instruction is usually divided into a number of strands which come under the banner of the 'literacy block'. The literacy block is often divided into instructional units and usually includes: reading; writing; spelling; handwriting; grammar; listening and speaking; phonics and phonemic awareness; and may include viewing and representing. This approach seems likely to continue as the new Australian Curriculum organises English into three strands: Language, Literature, and Literacy (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010). The literacy strand includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary development, spelling, handwriting, and phonics. Consequently, the learning and teaching of writing is seen as one part of literacy learning and as such may be taught in isolation.

### **Teachers' beliefs and attitudes**

Beliefs and attitudes are socially and culturally constructed, deeply seated, resistant to change, and central to our way of thinking, doing, and being (Rivalland, 2007). Beliefs are also the end result of an individual's upbringing, life experiences, and in the case of teachers, the result of socialisation processes in schools they have attended as students and worked in as teachers (McLachlan, Carvalho, de Lautour, & Kumar, 2006). Wherever they stem from, it appears that teachers' implicit beliefs are enduring and difficult to change (Hall, 2005; McLachlan, et al.; 2006; Sumsion, 2003) and are used to evaluate existing and new ideas about pedagogy. Beliefs, knowledge, and practice are inextricably intertwined (Foote, Smith, & Ellis, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978), acting as a 'contextual filter' through which teachers screen their classroom experiences, interpret

them, and adapt their subsequent practice (Clark & Peterson, 1986, cited in Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). “Teachers’ beliefs about literacy can [thus] be understood as including what they assume, think, and know about how young children develop literacy skills; what they perceive a teacher’s role in this process to be; and how they feel they should implement these practices in the classroom” (Hindman & Wasik, 2008, p. 480). Since teachers play a pivotal role in providing children with opportunities for literacy learning, their attitudes and beliefs directly and indirectly impact upon children’s developmental outcomes (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007). To approach the teaching of literacy from a Vygotskian perspective is to recognise literacy as a complex cultural phenomenon that will give children access to a new set of cognitive tools (Egan & Gajdamaschko, 2003).

### **The teacher as mediator of learning**

Although teachers work in teams for some things, for most of their day they work independently within their own classrooms, largely informed by their personal beliefs and theories of how children learn, despite systemic attempts to standardise curriculum using mandatory syllabus documents. It has been argued that a good teacher is “the most important factor accounting for the quality of student learning” (Ramsey, 2000, p. 16), a statement which is supported by many authorities (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2004; Australian Labor Party, 2007; Buckingham, 2003; Department of Education Science and Training, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hattie, 2009; Ingvarson, 2001; Rowe, 2003). On the other hand, the effect of poor quality teaching on student outcomes can be “debilitating and cumulative” and “greater than those that arise[s] from students’ backgrounds” (Darling-Hammond, 2000a, p. 3). Classrooms with the most effective literacy teachers are characterised by commonalities (high academic engagement, effective classroom management, and explicit teaching of skills), but there are marked differences in the way these common components come together (Gambrell et al., 2007). The authors are not suggesting that all teachers should operate in the same ways, but it is proposed that all children deserve a ‘good’ teacher and these children are never more vulnerable than when they are in their first year of schooling. A poor beginning can lead to frustration, avoidance, and a negative attitude towards school literacy, while, on the other hand, early success often leads to future success and a positive attitude towards school and literacy.

Teaching which reflects Vygotsky’s theories of learning involves organising teaching and learning experiences in ways that are often prevalent in early years classrooms. That is, instruction is planned to give practice within the zone of proximal development for individual children, cooperative learning activities are designed with groups of children operating at different cognitive levels, and scaffolding is a commonly-used strategy to assist and promote individual growth (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Talay-Ongan, 2004; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976)

### **Experience versus experiences**

Even though teachers have often gained similar pre-service qualifications (e.g., Bachelor of Education), these may reflect courses with varied content, taken in

different institutions, reflecting different educational philosophies over a range of 30+ years. A further difference might be seen between teachers who have continued to study at a post-graduate level and those teachers who may not have studied since they obtained their original qualifications. Changes to teacher demographics have also been apparent. For example, the median age of teachers in Australia increased from 34 to 43 years over the 15 years to 2001 (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003). In 2009, 80% of all full-time teaching staff members in primary schools in Australia were female (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

During the 1970s and 1980s it was suggested that there was a relationship between teachers' effectiveness and years of experience (Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Klitgaard & Hall, 1974), although not necessarily significant or linear. While some studies (see for example, Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004) established that inexperienced teachers (i.e., those with less than 3 years of experience) were typically less effective than more senior teachers, Darling-Hammond (2000b) argued that the benefits of experience appeared to level off after 5-8 years. More recent studies suggest that experience may assist with effectiveness, although some experienced teachers actually become less effective later in their careers (Chingosa & Peterson, 2010). Hattie (2009) differentiates between experienced and expert teachers, suggesting that experience alone is not enough to determine effectiveness. In a study conducted by Hindman and Wasik (2008), the more experienced teachers expressed greater levels of agreement with research-based findings about learning and teaching oral language.

### **Purpose of the study**

It is reasoned above that teaching beliefs, knowledge, and practice are intertwined and may impact on teacher effectiveness. As a means of examining this argument further, the present study is designed to explore some of these relationships using literacy (or more specifically writing) as a vehicle. The main aim of the study is to investigate the nature of teacher attitudes towards the learning and teaching of writing in the first year of school and to identify any broad underlying attitudinal dimensions. The secondary aim is to examine the influence of experience on these attitudinal dimensions. Arguably, a realisation of these aims will add to the on-going debate on how best to support the learning and teaching of literacy in the early years of schooling.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Two hundred and twenty-eight Kindergarten/Preparatory teachers from New South Wales and Victoria participated in the study. These teachers were all volunteers and were not known to the researchers. The vast majority of the teachers were female and their teaching experience ranged from 1-40 years, with an average teaching experience of approximately 15 years. Experience in teaching Kindergarten/Preparatory spanned 1-30 years, with an average experience of about 6 years. Even though the participating teachers were not required to provide their teaching qualifications, Kindergarten/Preparatory teachers in Australia generally hold a bachelor's degree

awarded by a university. This degree may be a specialist Early Childhood (Birth-8 years) award, a combined Early Childhood and Primary (Birth-8 years) award, or a General Primary (5-12 years) award. These degree courses invariably take four years of full-time study.

### **Procedure**

Following approval from the respective ethics committees of the various organisations implicated in the study, a survey was despatched to the principals of 200 New South Wales and 200 Victorian government primary schools that had been randomly selected from a number of regions within each of these Australian states. Both metropolitan and rural schools were part of this selection. Generally, only one copy of the survey was sent to each school, although larger schools received two or three copies. The principal was requested to pass on the survey to Kindergarten/Preparatory teachers. A total of 228 responses were received from teachers employed in some of the selected schools. However, only 193 of these responses (84.6%) were complete and for some items of data a lesser number of responses were accessible for subsequent analysis.

### **Instrumentation**

A draft survey was trialled with 12 teachers and then a pilot was conducted with 89 teachers. This pilot resulted in substantial changes, including the addition of new items and the rewording of items. The final survey was composed of two parts. Part 1 contained questions relating to background e.g., gender and teaching experience; whereas, Part 2 was made up of 40 items which sought responses on a 5-point Likert scale with anchor points strongly disagree to strongly agree. The latter set of items endeavoured to measure attitudes to a number of early education issues some of which overlapped with individual items, such that a single item sometimes encompassed more than one issue e.g., Item 2 'Young children do not clearly distinguish writing from drawing, suggesting that drawing may be a necessary part of early writing' cuts across issues pertaining to writing, drawing, and learning. The range of issues covered by the items also included: teacher confidence; educational theory; traditional approaches; socio-cultural approaches to literacy learning and instruction; bridging from the known to the unknown; and, provision of feedback. The data obtained from the survey were analysed by programs in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 16.0).

### **Identification of the measures**

Several items were discarded because the content was viewed as peripheral to the main issues being examined or in a small number of cases because there was almost unanimous agreement resulting in a minimum amount of variance. By reason of the size of the sample, it was not possible to undertake a single exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the remaining 36 items. Consequently, items with similar or related content were grouped in clusters first and then subjected, in turn, to an EFA. In spite of this approach, only one salient factor, which included eight items, emerged. Subsequent scale analysis of the eight items in this factor produced a Cronbach alpha, for a scale

using standardised items, of .70. All eight items were found to enhance the overall reliability of the scale and this measure was deemed to be a measure of Teacher Attitudes towards Language, Thinking, and Scaffolding (refer to Table 1). The distribution of the measure was checked using kurtosis and skewness values. Kurtosis and skewness describe the distribution of a set of data around the mean, and these values were -.305 and -.141, respectively. Values between -1 and +1 are considered acceptable and indicate a close to normal distribution (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

The majority of the other items in the survey appeared to be quite discrete and did not contribute to any coherent factor structure. Some examples of these items are listed in the Appendix.

Table 1: Items forming the measure/scale

Item
Language enables thought, making children's talk an essential part of the writing classroom.
Language development is facilitated by interaction between inexperienced (children) and experienced (teachers and adults) language learners.
Learning to write is enhanced if children are encouraged to build on their home and community experiences.
Children use drawing to communicate and as a scaffold, rehearsal, or elaboration technique in their writing.
Children learn best when their learning is scaffolded by a more experienced other who can teach to the point of need.
Kindergarten children should be encouraged to think 'out loud' (e.g., talk as they write).
Expressing their own ideas is the major purpose for writing in Kindergarten.
Drawing may act as a bridge between a child's home/community experiences and school by providing opportunities for meaningful conversations.

## Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed using the attitudinal scale measure as the dependent variable and four categories of teaching experience in years, viz., 0-4, 5-10, 11-20, and 21+, as the independent variable. The descriptive statistics for these categories are shown in Table 2. The result did not reveal an overall significant difference  $F(3,177) = 1.38, p=.25$  and, thus, it was concluded that there was no relationship between years of teaching experience and the attitudinal measure. However, it should be noted that the pattern of means indicates a trend such that those with least experience had the lowest scale scores with progressive increases for groups with greater teaching experience.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for overall teaching experience (standardised scores)

Teaching experience (years)	Mean	Standard deviation	N
0-4	-.097	.593	48
5-10	-.028	.524	38
11-20	-.029	.561	40
21+	.121	.566	55
Total	-.002	.566	181

A further one-way ANOVA was carried out to investigate the relationship between the attitudinal scale measure and three categories of Kindergarten/Preparatory teaching experience in years, viz., 0-2, 3-6, and 7+. The descriptive statistics for these categories are given in Table 3. It needs to be noted that the 0-2 category is made up of about 66% of teachers with less than four years of general teaching experience, the 3-6 category has approximately 53% of teachers with 11 or more years of general teaching experience, and the 7+ category has 70% of teachers with more than 21 years of general teaching experience.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for Kindergarten/Prep (K/P) teaching experience (standardised scores)

K/P teaching experience (years)	Mean	Standard deviation	N
0-2	-.176	.559	65
3-6	.128	.490	60
7+	.062	.607	56
Total	-.002	.566	181

The analysis was significant,  $F(2,178) = 5.26$ ,  $p = .006$  and the adjusted  $R^2$  (or effect size) was .045. Group comparisons were undertaken using the Tukey HSD which showed that there was a significant difference between the 0-2 group and the 3-6 group ( $p = .007$ ). And, that there was also a significant difference between the least experienced group (0-2 years) and the most experienced group (7+ years) at the 5% level. Figure 1 displays a graph for the means of these groups. Taken together, these results indicate that Kindergarten/Preparatory teaching experience has an effect on teacher attitude with respect to language, thinking, and scaffolding. In particular, those teachers with little experience in Kindergarten/Preparatory settings are less likely to hold positive attitudes towards language, thinking, and scaffolding compared to their more experienced counterparts. However, this result may be partly due to the interaction between overall lack of teaching experience and lack of specific K-2 experience.

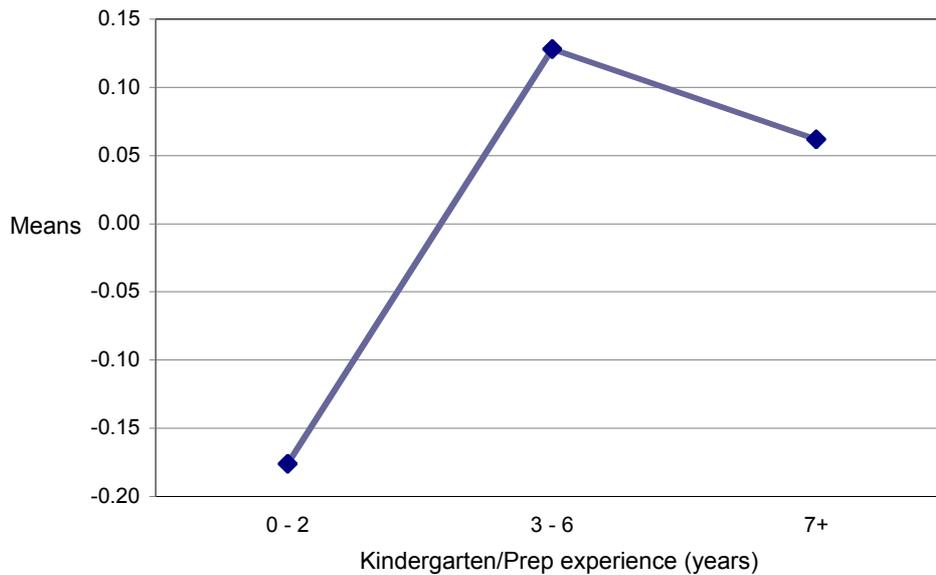


Figure 1: Means for the three groups of teachers with Kindergarten/Prep experience

## Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of teacher attitudes towards the learning and teaching of writing in the first year of school and to identify any broad underlying attitudinal dimensions. While many of the teacher attitudes appeared to be disparate, the results of an EFA demonstrated that only one dimension comprised of eight items, referred to as Teacher Attitudes towards Language, Thinking, and Scaffolding, was evident. This identified dimension indicated that there is a consistent set of attitudes related to a Vygotskian approach to learning and teaching early writing (Roehler & Cantlon, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1987). A close inspection of the items forming this dimension revealed that the four key principles of a Vygotskian approach, namely, active construction of knowledge, the social context, organisation of learning, and the critical role of language in learning, are represented in this dimension (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

A subsidiary aim of the research was to examine the influence of teaching experience on any attitudinal dimensions found. Through the use of ANOVAs it was shown that no significant relationship between years of teaching experience and the identified dimension was evident; however, a significant relationship between years of Kindergarten/Preparatory teaching experience and the attitudinal dimension was recorded. That is, those teachers with limited experience teaching in Kindergarten/Preparatory classrooms were less likely to hold positive attitudes towards a Vygotskian approach to the learning and teaching of writing compared to their more

experienced colleagues. To sum, it would seem that accrued early years teaching experience may foster positive attitudes towards a Vygotskian approach in a way that general teaching experience in other settings may not. Of course, this may not be a simple cause-and-effect relationship. For example, teachers with more Vygotskian attitudes may seek teaching placement at the K-2 level. However, the emphasis on the need and skills to become a reflective practitioner in teacher preparation programs over the last 25 years (see, for example, Drew & Bingham, 2001; Gibbs, 1988) might support the view that exposure to K-2 classrooms is necessary to help teachers develop individual frameworks that are socio-cultural. Such frameworks align with Vygotskian principles stated earlier in this article. This possibility is worthy of further research.

At least three qualifications must be borne in mind when assessing the results of the study, particularly in relation to the participants. First, the sample was based upon volunteering for participation. Second, with respect to K-2 experience, at the lower end in particular, teachers tended to be inexperienced generally and inexperienced at K-2 teaching. And third, a reasonable proportion of the participants' responses could not be used in the analysis and this poor response could not be investigated.

Despite these limitations, the study's findings point to a number of important considerations for teachers and those preparing teachers for the classroom. To begin with, if teaching drawing on a Vygotskian approach is seen as an ideal, as supported by teachers with significant exposure to K-2 classrooms, then neophyte teachers need to be encouraged through a mentoring program to use such an approach. This mentoring could involve visits to junior classrooms if the beginning teacher is placed full-time on a more senior class. A system of rotating beginning and seasoned teachers more frequently so that experience is gained on classes in the early years is arguably another way of ensuring more positive attitudes towards a Vygotskian approach to learning and teaching writing and any related skills.

Another consideration involves those preparing teachers for entry to their profession. Maybe greater emphasis needs to be given to the teaching of writing, and one way of achieving this is to have teacher trainees spend additional time in Kindergarten/Preparatory classrooms modelling the practices of effective teachers. An alternative way of having teacher trainees exposed to Kindergarten/Preparatory classrooms is to have a mandated professional experience (or practicum) in such a classroom setting.

A final consideration is that teacher appointments target junior classes in the first instance, if feasible, to promote positive attitudes towards a Vygotskian teaching approach. Valuable experiences in these settings allow early career teachers to then move to more senior classes with increased confidence and skill to support especially struggling students with broader literacy concerns.

Further study, beyond the current research, would be necessary to validate and check the reliability of the Teacher Attitudes towards Language, Thinking, and Scaffolding scale across other samples and jurisdictions. Additional refinement of the scale may make it a useful diagnostic instrument for use in teacher in-service training. Another

issue for future research deals with the impact of teacher qualifications and whether or not those teachers who have specialised postgraduate or even extensive in-service training have particular attitudes towards the learning and teaching of writing when compared to other groups of teachers.

It is worth exploring the result that many of the survey items appeared to be quite discrete. This was, no doubt, partly due to high levels of consensus on some items, hence lack of variance, but also because many responses seemed to be unrelated. A possible explanation for this latter finding was that many of the teachers sampled had not yet developed a fully-integrated educational philosophy and drew on a selection of unrelated beliefs/attitudes.

The present study has added to a body of literature pertaining to teaching literacy and teaching experience. Even though the study was not aiming to explore the notion of teaching effectiveness, it does offer some useful insights as to how teaching experience impacts on attitudes to professional practice, and how experience in a particular educational context tends to shape the attitudes of teachers. As advanced by Arbeau and Coplan (2007), this formation of attitudes can have both a direct and indirect influence on students' developmental outcomes.

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## Appendix: Examples of survey items

1. I feel confident supporting the children in my class who have language development problems.
2. Teaching sight words should not be a priority in a kindergarten writing program.
3. Poor handwriting may influence perceptions about a child's competence as a writer.
4. Early writing instruction should prioritise the teaching of print conventions (directionality, spaces, spelling and punctuation).
5. Teaching text types is an important part of my kindergarten writing program.

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