PARENTAL BELIEFS AND PARTNERSHIPS IN PROVISION OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This paper is to provide a review of research on parental beliefs and partnerships in provision of educational services for young children, in particular through a provision channel of early childhood programs, by addressing some of the important research issues in this field which have been leading to controversies and demanding research attention and to provide suggestions for potential directions for future research. With comments and critiques presented, this paper discusses issues related to terminology, belief structure, belief system, behavior representation, and representation and measurement of parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood. Probable relationships among parental beliefs and children's development are represented in a causality diagram to better understanding of the role parental beliefs may play in parental partnerships in early childhood programs and children's development.

Keywords: beliefs; partnerships; childhood; parents; early childhood programs

1. INTRODUCTION

With regard to beliefs and actions, "the relation between parental beliefs and actions is an old and troublesome issue in socialization research" and "attempts to demonstrate significant relations between beliefs and actual rearing behaviors have often been only partially successful" (Kochanska, 1990, p. 1934). While the old issue has been as troublesome as many researchers in this field of research might believe, the issue has been persistently gaining much research attention and effort in such research focuses as parental beliefs, parenting styles, parental partnerships in early childhood programs, and interwoven research endeavors (e.g., Elicker et al., 1997; Goodnow, 1988; Hedge and Cassidy, 2004; Sigel, 1985, 1986; Swick and Hooks, 2005; Winsler, Madigan, and Aquilino, 2005). To encourage research for promoting the quality of educational services provided in early childhood programs, the purpose of this paper is to provide a review of research on parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs and address some of the important issues in this field of research which have been leading to controversies and demanding research attention.

Sigel (1985) has pointed out the characteristics of the issue concerning the relation between parental beliefs and actions by mentioning that the search for the forces that guide parents' actions relative to their

children is as ancient as the interest in human conditions. Furthermore, as argued by Sigel with regard to various organizing constructs such as attitudes, personal-social characteristics, values and social class, and personal constructs, presented in related studies, each of these particular constructs, although contributing in some degree to our understanding of parent-child relationships, apparently does not provide adequate explanations regarding parental child-rearing practices. As to the currently emergence of a cognitive emphasis in psychological theory and research, Sigel asserted that it is not surprising that the belief construct has received increasing research attention, not only in the study of parent-child relationships, but also in a variety of social psychological studies.

The history of child behavior, as asserted by Vygotsky (1978), is born from interweaving of two developmental lines, one of biological origins and the other of sociocultural origin. Furthermore, Vygotsky argued that one of the most important sign systems is speech. Children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as their eyes and hands. In problem solving, there exist the level of actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. As proposed by Vygotsky, the difference between the level of actual development and the level of potential development is called the zone of proximal development. Problem solving enhances children's concept formation and development within a social context (e.g., Bodrova and Leong, 1996; Helm and Katz, 2001). The concept of the zone of proximal development has provided one of the foundations for the important role of parental guidance and involvement in children's learning experiences. Previous studies have reported on children's understandings of their experiences acquired within social contexts (e.g., Chafel and Neitzel, 2005; Deuchar, 2009; Mason and Tipper, 2008; Wong, 2010) and confirmed the influences of childhood experiences on children's development (e.g., Chen, Liu, Chang and He, 2008; Frosch and Mangelsdorf, 2001; Gershoff et al, 2010; McLeod and Karen, 2004). Parent involvement is an indispensable element of an early childhood education program. Raab and Dunst (1997) identified partnerships as the nature of relationships between early childhood program staff and the families they serve. Moreover, they stated that supportive partnerships are underscored by the belief that both parents and program staff bring something valuable to the relationship and that their shared abilities promote the well-being of a developing child.

This paper first discusses issues related to terminology and belief structure. Then a discussion of issues related to belief system and behavior representation is provided, followed by comments on some of the research issues related to representation and measurement of parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood as can be found in some research reports. Finally, probable relationships among parental beliefs and children's developmental outcomes are represented in a causality diagram to better understanding of the role parental beliefs may play in parental partnerships in early childhood programs and children's development and to provide suggestions for potential research directions.

2. TERMINOLOGY AND BELIEF STRUCTURE

One of the issues confronting researchers in the tradition within belief research appears to be one of stipulating a precise definition of belief. As Sigel (1985) mentioned with regard to belief, "while reviewing various sources for a definition of belief, I was beset by a number of problems of where to begin. For example,

the typical dictionary definition expresses confusion, and even contradiction, on the term" (p. 347). By citing Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), Sigel stated that beliefs refer to the knowledge a person has about an object. Sigel proposed the following definition: "Beliefs are knowledge in the sense that the individual knows that what he (or she) espouses is true or probably true, and evidence may or may not be deemed necessary; or if evidence is used, it forms a basis for the belief but not belief itself" (p. 348). Sigel concluded that beliefs are construction of reality.

In the line of research related to beliefs, Goodnow (1988) attempted to make a distinction between the two terms of "beliefs" and "ideas" to avoid the connotation of conviction that the term 'belief' might suggest. As Goodnow argued, "the term 'ideas' avoids the connotation of conviction that the term 'belief' carries (the ideas parents hold are not always held with conviction, and we need in fact to ask which are held with more tenacity or confidence than others)" (p. 288). Similarly, Goodnow argued that the term 'ideas' does not contain a precommitment to any distinctions among the views that parents hold. Goodnow attempted to make a distinction between the terms of "beliefs" and "ideas", and with this distinction to address issues related to parents' actions, feelings, and ideas. However, it appeared that Goodnow tended to use the two terms interchangeably without any mention or explanation in some important citations. For example, Goodnow (1988) began the article with the assertion that "two recent reviews of research on links between parents' ideas and parents' actions end with the suggestion that developmentalists turn to social psychology in order to enrich a relatively atheoretical field and supply new methods and direction for research (Miller, 1988, in this issue; Sigel, 1986)" (p. 286). Furthermore, Goodnow stated that "both Miller (1988), in this issue and Sigel (1986) express a particular concern with the outcomes of studies correlating parents' ideas with parents' actions" (p. 299). In the two citations, Goodnow presented the term "ideas" instead of "beliefs". However, by looking into the original sources, it can be found that the terms Miller (1988) and Sigel (1986) adopted were parents' beliefs rather than parents' ideas. The fact that Goodnow tended to use the two terms interchangeably suggests the difficulty in making a distinction between the two terms of "beliefs" and "ideas" in this line of research.

Previous literature has suggested that the issue of defining precisely the term of belief is associated with the issue of representing the structure of a belief. In discussing beliefs, Sigel (1985) proposed the term of belief content by mentioning that beliefs are some aspect of reality and therefore have content. Furthermore, Sigel argued that it is useful to categorize experience into knowledge domains for analytic and heuristic purposes. As Sigel argued, beliefs are categorizations of reality and can also be constructed as mental representations of aspects of reality, which are mental constructions of experience and often condensed and integrated into schemata or concepts. As to beliefs as knowledge, Sigel accepted the notion of knowledge for *what* and knowledge for *how*. Sigel thought that a distinction between the *what* and the *how* can be applied to explain the relationship between belief content and actions, as he argued that this distinction of the *what* and the *how* can be applied to beliefs, i.e., do we hold beliefs as representations of *what* that are distant or even unrelated to anticipated actions as well as to beliefs about *how* an anticipated action might be executed?

In the perspective of information sources, Scheibe (1970) asserted that beliefs have information sources although the character of these sources may vary widely. Moreover, Scheibe argued that the mathematical concept of probability, which is strongly related in any case to psychological judgments, is a fitting solution to the problem of qualifying degree of belief and thus beliefs are considered to vary quantitatively (between, and

including, zero and one) according to degree of certainty with a higher probability associated with a belief of a higher degree of certainty. In this perspective, Sigel (1985) "refer to the probability value of a belief to be true as the belief's truth value (see Scheibe, 1970)" (p. 348).

In previous studies attempting to define the term of "belief", there have appeared so many terms such as the terms of "true", "probably true", "conviction", and "truth value", which need further clarification. In this respect, some questions may be raised. Can only what a person is convinced of be termed "a belief"? Is there a critical point of truth value for what a person espouses to be termed a belief in that if the truth value for what a person espouses is higher than the critical value, what a person espouses can be termed a belief? In order to avoid the controversies as embedded in these questions, it is suggested for future research that a belief can be tentatively defined in a structural perspective as consisting of two elements: the belief content and the truth value of the belief content. One of the merits of viewing a belief as consisting of the two elements as a whole is that a change in a belief can be identified consistently as a change in the belief content, or a change in the truth value of the belief content, or a change both in the belief content and its truth value. Therefore, a study of changes in beliefs can be conducted in the structural perspective with regard to a change in the belief content, or a change in the truth value of the belief content, or a change both in the belief content and its truth value. Furthermore, by including the component of the truth value of the belief content in constructing the structure of a belief, a researcher in belief research can consistently adopt a Likert-type scale in measuring the individual's attitude as mentioned in Borg and Gall (1989) or collect data in the form of representation of the individual's perception of the likelihood of the realization of an event by a position in a unit line interval.

3. BELIEF SYSTEM AND CONTENT REPRESENTATION

Another issue related to the research within the belief tradition is the representation of the content of a belief in terms of other core beliefs as mentioned by Sigel (1985). Sigel (1985) argued that if beliefs are organized in systematic ways and generalized, then we can speak of a belief system and individuals' political, social, and religious beliefs would seem to be a coherent unit. Moreover, Sigel argued that theoretically core beliefs regarding various reality dimensions can be organized as a system and proposed three generic categories of knowledge: social, physical, and logicomathematical, within each of which beliefs can be identified within each of these areas. In this proposition, Sigel suggested identifying beliefs within each of three distinct areas. However, a belief such as one of so-called social logic may be a combination of beliefs from the three areas. This point shows the necessity of finer identification of belief content.

As to a belief system, some questions may be raised for understanding parental beliefs and behaviors: Are there important core beliefs which can be organized to form an individual's belief system? If yes, how are they organized? Can the content of a belief be represented by a linear combination of the important core beliefs in the belief system constructed by the important core beliefs as a point in an N-dimensional Euclidean space can be represented by a linear combination of the mutually independent axes of the N-dimensional Euclidean space? Does the belief system of an individual better explain the behavior of the individual than some dominant beliefs chosen from the individual's belief system? How can the conceptualized framework of a belief system be applied to analyze belief-behavior relationship in parent-child study?

4. BEHAVIOR REPRESENTATION

As cited in McGillicuddy Lisi (1985) with regard to the nature of behavior and the factors that affect behavior, theoretical constructs that represent mental states of individuals often have been based on assumptions that behavior is purposeful, structured, and predictable if the nature of those constructs is known, which is quite different from the view of behavior as a reaction (i.e., a response to stimuli). More explicit about the relationship between actions and their determinants is the statement made by Sigel (1985). Sigel argued that beliefs are constructed from experience, broadly defined, and held as absolute or probabilistic truth. As mentioned by Sigel, truth and beliefs are potentially the codeterminants of actions.

Sigel (1985) reported his research on the linkage between parental beliefs and parental behaviors in terms of teaching strategies. One of the aims of his study was to identify cognitive bases (beliefs) of parental teaching strategies. Twenty seven beliefs were identified from the 120 pairs of middle- and working-class mothers and fathers. Of these twenty seven beliefs, sixteen beliefs were employed for further analysis. These beliefs were basically parental beliefs about children and elements affecting children, which included readiness, negative feedback, impulsivity, conflict, structure of environment, creativity/imagination, cognitive restructuring, self regulation, absorption, direct instruction, observation/perception, stage, generalization, infusion, positive feedback, and negative affect. As stated by Sigel with regard to the findings, when beliefs are types that contain action we can predict parents' teaching strategies as well as their preferred teaching strategies. Sigel stated as an example the parental belief called direct instruction. With the belief of direct instruction, parents believe that children learn by directly instructing them as to what they should do and how they should do it. Furthermore, as found by Sigel, some beliefs are global, such as the beliefs that children learn through exploration, that children learn through the accumulation of knowledge, and that children learn through parental modifications of the environment, and these belief statements do not contain clear-cut, direct behavioral expressions. As to parents' ideas and actions, Goodnow (1988) proposed two major research positions: ideas give rise to actions vs. ideas follow actions. As Goodnow proposed for modifying models, agreement between ideas and actions is more likely to occur with some people rather than others, under some conditions than others, and with some actions than with others, and actions may best be viewed as the outcome of combining or balancing several principles or considerations.

In the line of research on parental beliefs and behaviors, there have appeared terms such as strategies, actions, attitudes, and responses without a uniform representation of the term *behavior* presented or attributes associated with a behavior identified. As suggested by previous studies, a behavior can be tentatively decomposed and represented by two important behavioral attributes: the process of a behavior as represented by a sequence of actions and the outcome of a behavior as represented by the outcome of a sequence of actions. For example, a behavior with a sequence of actions such as friendly gestures to others would end up with the outcome of the behavior as a "friendly" behavior. The proposed representation of a behavior by the two behavioral attributes is consistent with the statements Borg and Gall (1989) made in identifying an attitude and use of attitude scales about a behavioral component, "which is the individual's predisposition to act toward the attitude object in a particular way" (p. 311).

5. REPRESENTATION AND MEASUREMENT

One of the controversial issues related to research on parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs is representation and measurement of parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs. Raab and Dunst (1997) identified partnerships as "the nature of relationships between early childhood program staff and the families they serve" (p. 108). Moreover, they mentioned that supportive partnerships are reinforced by the belief that both parents and program staff bring something valuable to the relationship and that their shared abilities promote the well-being of a developing child. As suggested by the research mentioned previously such as Sigel (1985) and Goodnow (1988), parental beliefs may predict types of behaviors which might be adopted by parents. The types of behaviors adopted by parents naturally tend to establish different types of relationships between early childhood program staff and the families they serve. The shared abilities of early childhood program staff and the families they serve determine considerably the extent to which the developmental outcomes of their children as promised by the zone of proximal development may be achieved.

Segal (1985) examined the Ready for School Project in the perspective of the partnership between home and school by looking at maternal beliefs and involvement in the education of their young children. In the study, Segal developed a Q-sort instrument to measure parental values. To develop Q-sort statements, they asked home visitors to conduct an informal interview with each of the mothers on one of their home visits. In the course of the interview they were to ask mother what sort of person she would like her child to be. Moreover, if the mother answered in very general terms, the home visitor would probe further by raising more specific questions. The home visitors were instructed to record each goal or expectation stated by a mother on a separate card. As found by Segal, black, low-income, and single parent families were likely to give higher ratings to obedience and competition, and lower ratings to process goals and cooperation. The reverse held true for higher income, Caucasian, and married mothers. However, the partnership was examined merely by the amount of time spent by mothers with their child in project-related activities.

Without investigating parents' beliefs, Olmsted (1991) provided findings and suggestions regarding parent involvement in elementary education. In this article Olmsted presented quantitative and qualitative evidence from the first 20 years of Follow Through (1967-1986). The results indicated the benefits of parent involvement in the Follow Through program with regard to: (1) parents as advocates, (2) parents as decision makers, and (3) parents as teachers. As mentioned by Olmsted in discussing parents as advocates for school system, in one community FT parents requested information from the school administration about the state education fund allocation system and about any special community features considered by this allocation system, in order to assure themselves that their community was receiving its fair share of state education money. The study of Olmsted lacked information about parents' concerns with the allocation of the budget to different areas of school needs such as personnel, equipment, curriculum, activities, children's health, children's nutrition, and etc, which were important attributes of parents' active partnerships. Similarly, in the Parent Education FT program the desirable teaching behaviors (DTBs) that the program developed were important to parents' involvement in the program. However, Olmsted did not mention how the FT staff encouraged parents to use the "10 desirable teaching behaviors (DTBs) that parents were encouraged to use with their children" (p. 227). Neither did this paper provide information regarding how parents actively engaged in these interactions. While inspiring in many

respects, the study of Olmsted appeared to represent parental behaviors merely in the perspective of passive participants rather than active participants in children's learning at home, which suggested the difficulty of representation of parental partnerships in early childhood programs.

With regard to previous research on parent-caregiver relationships, Elicker et al. (1997) argued that "a shortcoming of the research to date, at least from a relationships perspective, is the focus on general attitudes among parents and caregivers, rather than the specific, mutual perceptions within each parent-caregiver dyad" (p. 85). In order to cope with the problem, the authors developed Parent–Caregiver Relationship Scale (PCRS) as a measure of the perceived quality of the relationship between the parent and the child care provider of an infant or toddler. For the PCRS, Elicker et al. proposed eight potential dimensions that might characterize the relationship. As proposed by Elicker et al., the dimensions included trust/confidence, open communication, respect/acceptance, caring, competence/knowledge, partnership/collaboration, shared values, and affiliation/liking. Moreover, for the PCRS the authors constructed parallel parent and caregiver forms of a 35-item Likert-type scale, in which each of the hypothesized eight relationship dimensions had 3 to 5 items. Among the 35 items, there existed 11 items with negative wording. Respondents rated each item from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

As revealed in the study of Elicker et al. (1997), in designing an instrument for investigating parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs there may exist a problem of non-disjointed dimensions in an instrument.   In the PCRS as designed by Elicker et al., the eight dimensions were not disjoint in that some dimensions shared common elements at the same time. The existence of common elements in the dimensions is also revealed by the statistical results Elicker et al. derived. As found by Elicker et al., while both parents and caregivers seemed to think of confidence in the other as a distinct aspect of the relationship, parents emphasized respect, trust, and caring, as well as the knowledge and skills of the caregiver but caregivers' notions of confidence in the parent included open communication and agreement about caregiving issues, as well as the perceived child rearing knowledge and skill of the parent. For the parent, the dimension "confidence" included respect, caring, and the knowledge of the caregiver, which were just three other dimensions of the eight proposed dimensions. Similarly, for the caregiver the dimension "confidence" included open communication and the perceived child rearing knowledge and skill of the parent, which were just two other dimensions of the eight proposed dimensions. The problem of non-disjointed dimensions in the PCRS as designed by Elicker et al. has pointed out the issue of non-disjointed dimensions which might exist in instruments designed by researchers in examining parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs.

In addition to the problem of non-disjointed dimensions in the PCRS, Elicker et al. also encountered the problem of non-congruency of the parent and caregiver measures. As mentioned by Elicker et al., "with additional study, we hope to develop the PCRS as a dyadic measure of the parent-caregiver relationship, rather than two separate measures representing each adult's perspective" (p. 96). As a solution to the problem, Elicker et al. proposed a second approach which would be to average parents' and caregivers' PCRS ratings, item by item. As they expected of the solution, "presumably, averaged scores would indicate the overall quality of the parent-caregiver relationship" (p. 96). However, the average scores as derived may be quite misleading. Take the dimension of confidence for example. A parent's rating of 1 ("strongly disagree") in one item of the dimension "confidence" with his/her caregiver's rating of 5 ("strongly agree") in the same item is quite different from a

parent's rating of 3 in the item with his/her caregiver rating of 3 in the same item. However, the average scores for the two cases are equal. In the latter case, we have agreement in the two partners' evaluation of each other in terms of confidence. However, the disagreement in the former case showed that a dyadic confidence level was not established in the case.

Furthermore, the problem of non-congruency in studying the parent-caregiver relationship would be one deserving research attention. As shown in Elicker et al. (1997), the problem can be seen in one item in the parent PCRS and the caregiver PCRS. In the parent PCRS, the item that "CG is someone I can rely on" (p. 90) is corresponding to the item that "P is someone I can rely on" (p. 91) in the caregiver PCRS. As shown in the paper, the item that "CG is someone I can rely on" was selected by the statistical results as belonging to the dimension "confidence" in the parent PCRS. However, the item that "P is someone I can rely on" was selected as belonging to the dimension "collaboration" in the caregiver PCRS. In the example, the items in the separate parent PCRS and caregiver PCRS were associated with an identical relationship that "the partner is someone I can rely on". However, the relationship belonged to the dimension "confidence" in the parent PCRS, but belonged to the dimension "collaboration" in the caregiver PCRS. Due to the mentioned problems faced by Elicker et al., in the paper the authors could present only the results of the separate measures of parent and caregiver perceptions: separate PCRS total and subscale means for parent confidence, collaboration, and affiliation and for caregiver confidence, collaboration, and caring. This is quite contrary to Raab and Dunst's expectation of the instrument: "according to the authors, the scale is intended to be used as a dyadic measure rather than separate measures of parent and caregiver perceptions" (p. 124). The problem of non-congruency in the parent-caregiver relationship in the PCRS as encountered by Elicker et al. (1997) might also confront other researchers in this area.

Moreover, in examining issues of parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs researchers may face a problem with interpreting a respondent's rating of an item with negative wording as encountered in the study of Elicker et al. (1997). Take for example the item of viewing CG as employee, not partner in the parent PCRS in Elicker et al.. As to a parent's view of a caregiver, there may exist four possibilities, including viewing CG both as employee and partner, viewing CG as employee, not partner, viewing CG as partner, not employee, and viewing CG neither as employee, nor as partner. If a parent rates the item with 1 ("strongly disagree"), s/he may refer to any one of the other three possibilities, which demonstrates the necessity of designing measures more precisely with respect to the probable outcomes or events in a space of parental partnerships in early childhood programs.

The problems as mentioned with regard to the study of Elicker et al. (1997) reveal the difficulty in conducting research related to parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs. As shown in the study of Elicker et al. (1997), in order to properly reflect partnerships between parents and program staff, not only the constructed instrument items matter in measuring partnerships, but the ways in which the items are measured matter as well. In the line of research on partnerships between parents and program staff, researchers do face the issue of separate measures of parent-staff partnerships versus a dyadic measure of parent-staff partnerships. Moreover, in the perspective of parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs, although Elicker et al. did not explicitly investigate parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs, beliefs of parents and caregivers were important constructs in the study. For example, beliefs of parents can be found in the item "CG is someone I can rely on" in the parent PCRS and those of caregivers in the item "P is

someone I can rely on" in the caregiver PCRS. Therefore, designing an appropriate dyadic measure involves appropriate measures of beliefs of parents and program staff and their interactions in early childhood education. Furthermore, the problems as mentioned with regard to the study of Elicker et al. (1997) reveal the difficulty and some of the research directions in conducting research related to parental beliefs and partnerships in early childhood programs.

6. CONCLUSION

Parental beliefs are important elements of parental knowledge and may be organized in systematic ways and generalized into belief systems. Parental behaviors may influence children's development directly or indirectly through interacting with contextual elements to form arranged contextual elements for children's development, including physical objects, domestic and social services, partnerships in early childhood programs, and social relations. The information embedded in the arranged contextual elements may also feedback to parents through parental information perception, processing, and construction and lead to changes in parental beliefs. Probable relationships among parental beliefs and behaviors, contextual arrangement and service provision, and children's development are represented in Figure 1, presented in the Appendix, to better understanding of the role parental beliefs may play in parental partnerships in early childhood programs and children's development and to provide suggestions for potential research directions. As suggested by Figure 1, research on early childhood education and provision of developmentally appropriate services for young children may be conducted with regard to a single relationship as represented by a relationship arrow in the figure such as parental beliefs and arranged contextual elements and services, or with regard to more than one relationship such as parental beliefs, arranged contextual elements and services, and children's development.

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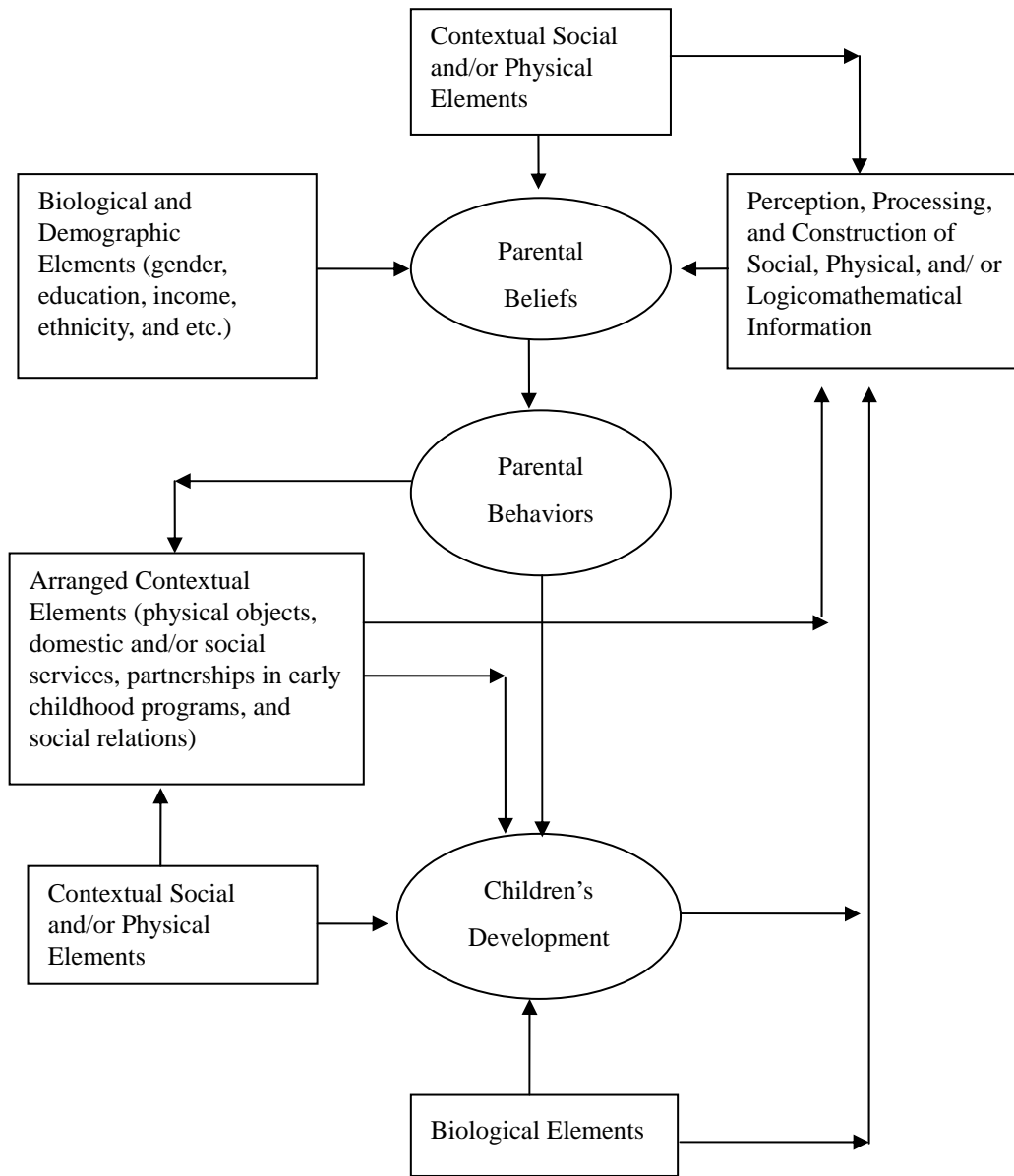
APPENDIX: PARENTAL BELIEFS AND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Figure 1: Parental beliefs and children's development