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Predicting preschool teacher retention and turnover in newly hired Head Start teachers across the first half of the school year

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ABSTRACT

Head Start teacher retention and turnover is an important issue, but has been under researched. The aim of the current study was to assess which factors could predict preschool teacher retention and turnover halfway through the school year. Eighty-one newly hired Head Start teachers qualified to participate at the beginning of the school year. However, 12 quit before they could be recruited to participate, and four dropped out of the study, leaving 65 participants to complete a demographics questionnaire and a job satisfaction questionnaire within the first 30 days of the school year. In January, preschool teachers were followed up to see if they continued or quit teaching. In total, 36% of newly hired Head Start teachers had quit. Head Start teachers were more likely to quit if they had: less desire to stay teaching in the early childhood field, did not feel happy, had a worse relationship with their supervisor, did not like their work environment, or had a lower education compared to those who continued teaching. The data further show that the more of these risk factors a preschool teacher possessed, the more likely they were to quit. A predictive logistic regression model was built using these five factors. A post hoc analysis revealed that lead preschool teachers were more likely to have a higher education, be married, perceive their workload to be too high, and perceive that they have inadequate facilities compared to assistant preschool teachers. The implications of these findings are further explored.

Head Start was founded in 1965 during the War on Poverty under President Johnson as an 8-week summer program in a few low-income communities. Today it is one of the largest early childhood education programs in the United States, employing 123,000 people and annually serving around 848,000 3- to 5-year-old children and their families. Head Start focuses on enrolling at-risk children, such as those at or below 100% of the federal poverty level ($23,550 for a family of four in 2013), as well as enrolling special needs and foster children. Once enrolled, Head Start children are provided with several services including comprehensive early childhood education, nutrition, medical, dental, and mental health services, as well as social services and parental support (Zigler, Marsland, & Lord, 2009).

Over the past half century, Head Start has incrementally made several strides toward expanding and improving the quality of its services. Recent enactments include expanding Head Start in 1994 to include pregnant women, infants, and toddlers (Early Head Start), focusing on school readiness in the 1998 Head Start Reauthorization Act, and again reauthorizing Head Start in 2007. The 2007 reauthorization endorsed the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (Public Law 110–134—DEC. 12, 2007), which mandated a rise in the quality of Head Start through program eligibility requirements, on-going monitoring of the program, managers, and teachers, and increased educational requirements for lead and assistant preschool teachers. At least half of all Head Start lead preschool teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree, while all assistant preschool teachers are required to have either a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or an associate's degree. In 2013, two-thirds of lead teachers held a bachelor's degree, far exceeding the mandated requirements (National Head Start Association, 2014). Overall, Head Start is considered to provide good quality services, with 70% of Head Start classrooms ranked as either "good" or better on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Families, January 2010). However with Head Start intensifying the amount of work they expect from their preschool teachers (Bullough Jr,

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Hall-Kenyon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014), it is important to understand the implications of these demands, especially as they relate to teacher retention and turnover.

Preschool teacher turnover and its effects on child outcomes

Child outcomes are influenced by teacher turnover, as teacher turnover can interrupt the attachment between child and teacher, leading to emotional stress and risk factors in children (Hale-Jinks, Knopf, & Knopf, 2006). More specifically, teacher turnover rates are shown to affect children's language and vocabulary skills (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1990), as well as their emotional stability (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006). On the other hand, teacher retention rates are connected to high-quality programs, leading to children having more advanced language and pre-math skills, more positive self-concepts, better relationships toward their teachers, and better social behavior (Helburn & Culkin, 1995). Therefore, high turnover rates lower the quality of education children receive (Helburn & Culkin, 1995), and thus limit the potential positive outcomes that could be delivered to the children and their families.

Preschool teachers are prone to leaving

Preschool teachers have a turnover rate of 25–50% per year (Burton et al., 2002; Lyons, 1997; Miller & Bogatova, 2009), with nearly one-fifth of child care center-based staff leaving the early childhood education field (Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001). In comparison, it takes teachers of school-age children three to five years of teaching to reach those percentage levels (Brill & McCartney, 2008).

Researching preschool teacher retention is a complex task, since preschool teachers leave their position for a myriad of reasons. However, these reasons have similarities across cultures, as research from Canada (Boyd & Schneider, 1997), Australia (Lyons, 1997), Greece (Rentzou, 2012), the United States, and Internationally (Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay, & Marshall, 2013) shows that preschool teachers typically fall into one of three categories for leaving their employment: (1) *Personal reasons* such as low salary and benefits (Goelman & Guo, 1998; Whitebook & Bellm, 1999), low job status (Goelman & Guo, 1998), not wanting to stay in the early childhood field (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013) and issues such as family sickness and death (Goelman & Guo, 1998); (2) *Classroom responsibilities* such as student behavior problems (Bullough Jr, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012; Kaiser, Rogers, & Kasper, 1993), having high stress (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013), high demands and responsibilities, poor working conditions, and emotional and physical exhaustion (Goelman & Guo, 1998; Rentzou, 2012); and (3) *Relationship issues* such as when teachers perceive a lack of communication and social support (Goelman & Guo, 1998), not working well with co-workers (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013; Kilgallon, Maloney, & Lock, 2008), are not permitted to work with the organization in decision making (Boyd & Schneider, 1997), and if staff, like center directors and other preschool teachers, terminate their positions (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Teacher turnover may create a snowball effect (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003), since the responsibilities of the teacher who quits now falls on those who continue teaching, thus placing an added burden (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006) and additional work (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003) on those who continue teaching, such as completing more paperwork and helping to train substitute teachers, while managing the classroom.

Low wages are seen as the strongest predictor of child care staff turnover (Whitebook & Bellm, 1999), while high wages are seen as the strongest predictor of attracting qualified staff (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Teacher educational attainment is also an important factor regarding turnover, especially when linked with teacher salary (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003); therefore, some intervention studies have focused on these two factors (Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, & Mauzy, 2007). However, focusing on salary and educational attainment *alone* may not rectify the issue of preschool teacher retention. For example, some countries, like New Zealand, have pay parity (Dalli, 2008), thus dramatically reducing the importance of salary on turnover rates. Additionally, despite receiving a much lower salary compared to other professions in the United States (Barnett, 2003), the literature typically demonstrates that preschool teachers are not likely to leave due to *only* receiving a low salary (Greene, 1999; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013). This is in line with other research that notes that the preschool teachers' main motivation for teaching is to help nurture, educate, and support young children and their families (Bullough Jr et al., 2012; Kaiser et al., 1993). Preschool teachers are further committed to their center if they possess high job satisfaction (Manlove & Guzell, 1997) by having positive interactions with children, cooperating well with co-workers, having a supportive supervisor, good working conditions, and having the chance for promotions (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013).

Neglecting preschool teacher retention research

Early childhood education research is lacking in relation to preschool teacher job satisfaction and retention (Goelman & Guo, 1998; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2013). Hall-Kenyon et al.'s (2013) review on preschool teachers' well-being found that the majority of the research focuses on preschool teachers' salary and education levels; therefore, they argue that more research is needed beyond these issues, emphasizing the need to understand other mechanisms behind preschool teachers' job satisfaction and retention. There has also been a call for research to focus on new preschool teachers (Noble & Macfarlane, 2005), as well as on teachers who work with children in low-income preschools (Tran & Winsler, 2011), as these populations are more likely to experience teacher turnover and therefore potentially negatively effect child outcomes.

Only one article is published on Head Start teachers' well-being and retention (Bullough Jr et al., 2012). Bullough Jr et al. (2012) gathered survey data on 48 currently employed Head Start preschool teachers (lead teachers, assistant teachers, and aides). They first tried to see if there were any differences with respect to work satisfaction, efficacy, or confidence levels based on the preschool teachers' position and on their level of education, respectively. They found that there were no differences based on the type of position held or on their educational levels. However, they noted that 58% considered quitting Head Start due to various factors such as a low salary, to attend a higher education institution, the preschool teachers' age and health, family concerns, stress, skills not fully utilized, and children's difficult behavior. However, Bullough Jr et al. (2012) did not test to see what characteristics *actually* led to Head Start preschool teachers quitting.

Study aim

The aim of this study was to explore which factors are important to Head Start preschool teacher retention and which are associated with preschool teacher turnover according to preschool teacher reports. Additionally, the current analysis explores if Head Start preschool teachers with fewer factors will be more likely to continue teaching compared to those with more factors.