

Teacher Perceptions of Multilevel Policies and the Influence on Nutrition Education in North Carolina *Head Start* Preschools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To develop a theory that explains the process of how teachers' perception of multilevel policies may influence nutrition education (NE) teaching strategies in *Head Start* preschools.

Design: Semistructured telephone interviews.

Setting: North Carolina *Head Start* preschools.

Participants: Thirty-two *Head Start* teachers.

Phenomenon of Interest: All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Following a grounded theory approach, authors coded interview data for emergent themes.

Analysis: Two primary themes emerged during analysis, including teachers' policy perceptions and teacher-perceived influence of policy on NE.

Results: A theoretical model was developed to explain how teachers' perceptions of policies influenced NE (eg, teaching strategies) in the classroom. Teachers discussed multiple policy areas governing their classrooms and limiting their ability to provide meaningful and consistent NE. How teachers perceived the level of regulation in the classroom (ie, high or low) influenced the frequency with which they used specific teaching strategies.

Conclusion and Implications: Despite federal policies supporting the provision of NE, teachers face competing priorities in the classroom (eg, school readiness vs NE) and policies may conflict with standardized NE curricula. To understand how *Head Start* centers develop local policies, additional research should investigate how administrators interpret federal and state policies.

Key Words: *Head Start* program, preschool children, policy, teaching, qualitative research (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017; ■:1-10.)

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INTRODUCTION

Federally funded *Head Start* programs provide more than 1 million low-income children and families with early childhood education services,

including health and nutrition.^{1,2} Founded in 1965 with the goal of improving low-income children's school readiness skills and positively influencing health status, the program is guided by the *Head Start* Program

Performance Standards (Performance Standards).³ The Performance Standards govern the expectations for children's cognitive, social, and physical development and provide local programs with a comprehensive set of federal policies to ensure the provision of high-quality services, administrative structure, and center-level governance.³

The nutrition-related Performance Standards (§1304.23) require programs to follow appropriate child feeding practices, educate children about nutrition, and provide meals and snacks that meet child nutrition standards.³ Per the Performance Standards, *Head Start* programs are required to participate in the *Child and Adult Care Food Program* (CACFP) or the *National School Lunch Program* and *National School Breakfast Program* for the provision of healthy foods.³ The Performance Standards are a recommended model for non-*Head Start*

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programs given the comprehensive focus on health⁴ and alignment with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics benchmarks for child care nutrition.⁵ Unfortunately, studies have been inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of *Head Start* and CACFP policies for improving children's nutrition-related knowledge and behaviors. Until the most recent revisions,⁶ the Performance Standards and CACFP had not revised for 18 and 48 years, respectively.^{7,8}

The Performance Standards (old and new) are supportive of nutrition education (NE) activities in the classroom and during the mealtime.^{3,6} Furthermore, because providing young children with food and NE helps develop positive eating habits,⁹⁻¹¹ an increasing number of health and NE interventions focus on the preschool classroom. Previous research suggested that *Head Start* teachers provide children with more NE compared with non-*Head Start* teachers, which may be attributed to the Performance Standards.⁵ However, a number of studies suggested that barriers to success remain within *Head Start* at the program, state, and federal levels.¹²⁻¹⁶ These barriers frequently include limited classroom time, staff training, and limited program funding.¹²⁻¹⁵ As more health and nutrition resources and interventions target *Head Start* classrooms, it is imperative to consider the policy environment.¹⁷

Although the revised Performance Standards went into effect in November, 2016⁶ and changes are planned for implementation to the CACFP in late 2017,⁸ the lack of evidence regarding how these standards (old and new versions) affected NE in the *Head Start* classroom may result in the creation of restrictive policies and/or the elimination of supportive policies. With limited evidence to inform a decision, policy makers may unknowingly implement more stringent school readiness policies, limiting the time available for NE. The majority of studies that investigated *Head Start* policies in the context of nutrition focused on (1) the provision of healthy meals and/or provider compliance with federal regulations (eg, CACFP meal/nutrient standards),^{18,19} and (2) policy-based barriers.¹³ Many studies neglected to examine how multiple levels of policy

(ie, federal, state, municipal, and/or center) impose barriers in *Head Start* classrooms and fail to address adequately the influence of non-nutrition-related policies on the provision of NE in the classroom. An in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of federal, state, and center-level policies is needed to minimize barriers to NE interventions in the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to develop a substantive-level theory²⁰ that explains the process of how teachers' perception of multilevel policies may influence their teaching strategies for NE in North Carolina *Head Start*-funded preschools. A substantive-level theory is a theory known to exist only within the context of the study, and which has not been tested across other populations.²⁰

METHODS

Study Design

This analysis was part of a larger study¹⁴ investigating the state of NE in North Carolina *Head Start* preschools. The original study¹⁴ sought to gain insight into teachers' NE experiences. During the analysis of the original study, the influence of policy emerged as a key phenomenon of interest¹⁴; therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the influence of policy specifically. The authors of the current study used a grounded theory approach to explore how teacher perceptions of multilevel policies, performance standards, and regulations may influence NE in *Head Start* preschools.²⁰ Throughout this article, the term *policy* represents any federal, state, and organizational or center-level requirements affecting *Head Start* classrooms, inclusive of regulations, rules, directives, and performance standards. The terms *researchers* and *data collectors* designate individuals involved in the original study, whereas *authors* and *investigators* indicate those involved in the current analysis.

The authors chose a grounded theory approach because, to their knowledge, no research existed to explain which policies and level of policy teachers perceived to have the greatest impact on their ability to teach NE in North Carolina *Head Start*-funded preschools.²¹ The researchers chose semi-

structured interviews to investigate factors that influenced the provision of NE in *Head Start*-funded preschools. Semistructured interviews were chosen because participants' open-ended responses provided in-depth insight into the experiences, perceptions, and context of North Carolina-based *Head Start* preschool classrooms. Interview guides addressed major areas related to NE in *Head Start* classrooms, such as general policies related to NE, with questions progressing from broad to narrow within each area. Interview questions related to policies asked: (1) Are there any general restrictions, things you can and can't [sic] do in the classroom? (2) Does your site have any policies or requirements on NE? If yes, can you describe them for me? (3) Are there any specific requirements related to the content of NE activities? (4) What do you think needs to change, if anything, about the policies and requirements?

Participants and Recruitment

The researchers identified 58 *Head Start* organizations for potential participant recruitment. They initiated contact with health and nutrition coordinators in all 58 *Head Start* organizations via phone with details about the study and asked the coordinators to provide teachers in their organization with information regarding study participation. Data collection ceased when theoretical saturation was achieved.²² Of the organizations initially contacted, teachers from 18 *Head Start* programs (31%) agreed to participate in this study. All participants were teachers employed by federally funded *Head Start* preschools in North Carolina. Eligibility in the study required all participants to be aged >18 years at the time of data collection. Informed consent to participate was obtained before data collection. This study received approval from the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection

Four trained data collectors with no prior relationship to teachers conducted semistructured telephone interviews. Interviews were conducted on a 1-on-1 basis between data collectors and

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