

# Nutrition Education Resources in North Carolina–Based *Head Start* Preschool Programs: Administrator and Teacher Perceptions of Availability and Use

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to provide new insight into common barriers to the availability and use of nutrition education (NE) resources in *Head Start* preschool programs based on administrator and teacher perceptions.

**Methods:** In-depth, semistructured phone interviews (n = 63) were conducted with administrators (n = 31) and teachers (n = 32) from North Carolina–based *Head Start* programs. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed qualitatively using content analysis to identify common themes.

**Results:** Five emergent themes were identified within the areas of NE resource availability and use and barriers to NE resource availability and use. Participants expressed desire for greater organization of existing NE material resources, increased community support, and professional development opportunities for teachers specific to NE. Funding and time constraints were reported as affecting NE resources.

**Conclusions and Implications:** Creative strategies for addressing NE resource availability and use and barriers (eg, NE integration with educational standards) in *Head Start* are needed.

**Key Words:** nutrition education resources, teachers, administrators, *Head Start*, children, qualitative (J Nutr Educ Behav. 2016;48:655-663.)

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## INTRODUCTION

Over 20% of American preschool children (aged 3–5 years) are overweight or obese,<sup>1</sup> which increases their risk of becoming obese adults and developing

weight-related chronic diseases later in life.<sup>2–4</sup> Obesity is most prevalent in children from low-income, low-resource families, who often have limited access to healthy, nutritious, affordable food and safe areas for phys-

ical activity and recreation.<sup>1</sup> Many low-income preschoolers attend *Head Start* (HS), the largest federally funded child care program in the US.<sup>5,6</sup> All HS programs are governed by program performance standards that mandate implementation of nutrition education (NE) and the provision of healthy meals and snacks.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, many HS staff believe they receive inadequate training to provide NE confidently.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the amount and quality of NE provided in HS is challenged by many factors including restrictive policies and regulations, NE resources, priority given to NE, and time constraints within the classroom environment.<sup>5,7,8</sup>

Successful implementation of NE in HS classrooms requires addressing NE barriers by identifying effective and feasible NE resources. Past studies demonstrated the effectiveness of multifaceted, all-inclusive NE resources in producing positive health and behavioral outcomes in

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preschool children.<sup>9-11</sup> Preschool NE resources often combine traditional strategies and materials (eg, food tastings, activity sheets, music<sup>12,13</sup>), incorporate ways to engage families (eg, recipes sent home), and feature a teacher professional development component (generally specific to a curricular resource).<sup>12-15</sup>

Despite the need for a targeted approach to channel NE resources effectively, little is known about HS administrators' and teachers' perceptions of NE resources available for the HS classroom. To date, most studies have focused on developing, implementing, or testing an individual curriculum, program, or intervention rather than examining overall NE resource availability and use.<sup>9-15</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine HS administrator and teacher perceptions of resources available to support NE in North Carolina-based programs.

## METHODS

### Study Design

This study presented an inductive content analysis of 63 in-depth semistructured interviews exploring HS administrator and teacher perceptions related to NE resources in HS programs. Researchers developed semistructured interview guides using open-ended and in-depth questioning to examine the state of NE as perceived by North Carolina HS administrators and teachers. Throughout the article, the term "researchers" indicates those responsible for recruitment and data collection.<sup>8</sup> The North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board approved all study materials and methods.

### Participants and Recruitment

Researchers obtained a list of all HS-funded organizations within North Carolina through the state's Office of *Head Start* Collaboration and the North Carolina *Head Start* Association. A total of 58 *Head Start*-funded organizations were identified as operational at the time of the study. Researchers recruited participants systematically. To begin, the Directors of each North Carolina-based HS organization were contacted. Direc-

tors facilitated recruitment of health/nutrition coordinators by providing their contact information. Researchers recruited coordinators by contacting them individually via phone to participate in the study. Coordinators then facilitated teacher recruitment by providing information about the study to teachers within their organization. All participants were required to be over age 18 years and employed by a North Carolina-based HS-funded organization. Researchers compensated participants with a \$20 gift card. Administrators (health/nutrition coordinators) were defined as those responsible for implementing policies and requirements with regard to the HS organizations' federally mandated nutrition requirements. Teachers were defined as those responsible for providing NE to children aged 3–5 years, having direct contact with the children, and needing NE resources.

### Data Collection

Four researchers conducted telephone interviews between September, 2011 and May, 2012. Before the beginning of data collection, interviewers were trained in human ethics and qualitative research methods using the 5-phase protocol for training interviewers of Goodell et al.<sup>16</sup> As part of the phased training method and in an effort to ensure consistency and credibility, each data collector also completed 2 pilot interviews, 1 with a fellow researcher and 1 with a non-*Head Start* preschool administrator or

teacher. All interviews were conducted using 1 of 2 in-depth, semistructured guides (1 for administrators and 1 for teachers). Eight interview questions, 7 of which were resource-specific, yielded the greatest amount of insight (Table 1). Primary questions were open-ended and broad in nature; researchers used specific and general probes to gain additional insight into perceptions related to HS NE resources. Questions grew more focused and specific as the interview progressed. Guides were initially evaluated for clarity and content through the 4 mock interviews completed during interviewer training. Researchers further revised the guides after the completion of the first 11 interviews (8 coordinators and 3 teachers) to improve the clarity of participants' responses by adding probes regarding specific requirements, restrictions, and strategies related to classroom-based NE. A total of 52 participants responded to the modified guide (23 coordinators and 29 teachers). Each interviewer completed detailed field notes during interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and all recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded manually using a basic word-processing program. Final interviews lasted 30–90 minutes and concluded with a review of answers received from participants. Participants were then asked for clarification or confirmation of each answer given. Data collection continued until saturation was reached and new insights were no longer obtained from the interview responses.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1.** In-Depth Structured Interview Questions Relating to Nutrition Education Resource Availability and Use

What issues come up when your teachers are teaching nutrition education inside and outside their classroom?
What types of training have your teachers had related to nutrition education?
Do you feel that your teachers need more training related to nutrition education?
Are you aware of any other training available to your teachers related to nutrition education?
What type of training have you had related to nutrition?
Can you provide an example of 1 of your teacher's formal and informal nutrition education activities?
What sort of resources do you wish were available for teaching nutrition education in the classroom?
What would your ideal nutrition education curriculum look like or include?

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