



# Is all support equal?: Head Start preschool teachers' psychological job attitudes



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Study of preschool teachers' psychological job attitudes on their teaching expectations.
- Teaching expectations are growing.
- Support received is often superficial and practically unhelpful.
- When support is helpful, preschool teachers report improved job attitudes.
- Not all support in needed equally.

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## ABSTRACT

Head Start preschool teachers are at risk for quitting their employment if they have negative job attitudes. Using a semi-structured interview guide, 20 Head Start preschool teachers were asked about their psychological job attitudes. The analyses indicated that preschool teachers' job attitudes were influenced by the amounts and types of support they received regarding their organizational regulations, workplace relationships, and the structural quality of their classrooms, with preschool teachers requiring the most support from their co-teacher and their center director, as well as for children with behavioral problems, and the time needed to complete their paperwork.

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## 1. Introduction

Around 11 million children under the age of five attend child-care in the United States (Child Care Aware of America, 2016), and around one million are enrolled in the publically funded Head Start program (Head Start, 2015). Child outcomes, such as their intelligence quotient, cognitive abilities, school achievement, grade retention, socio-emotional adjustment, and behavioral outcomes are affected by the quality of the preschool program (Barnett, 1995; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). As such, there

is political, societal, and familial pressure to provide these young children with a high quality early childhood education. However, the average quality of different preschool programs is consistently negatively affected, as every year they have turnover rates between 25 and 50 percent (Miller & Bogatova, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004; Wells, 2015; Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001); thus creating a “revolving door” of inexperienced preschool teachers (Brill & McCartney, 2008). This amount of turnover has detrimental affects on children's development and adjustment (Hale-Jinks, Knopf, & Knopf, 2006).

Preschool teachers stay or quit teaching for a variety of reasons (Early et al., 2007; Goelman & Guo, 1998; Greene, 1999; Wells, 2015) including 1) personal background factors, such as their education, age, marital status, and mental health status; 2) familial

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factors, such as a partners' job relocation, illness, or death, 3) internal factors, such as their self-efficacy or their wantonness to continue teaching in the early childhood field; 4) external non-job related factors, such as an illness in the family or spousal job relocation, and 5) external job-related factors, such as their relationships with others at work, job-related stress, their workload, and organizational factors. While there has been some research on which factors predict preschool teacher turnover, there is a paucity of research completed on how external job-related factors affect the preschool teachers' psychological job attitudes (Jennings, 2015; Jeon, Buettner, & Hur, 2016). Since behavioral change theories, like the theory of planned behavior, argue that attitudinal changes (e.g. I do not like my supervisor) affect a person's actual behavior change (e.g. deciding to quit teaching) (Ajzen, 1991), it is important to further explore preschool teachers' external job-related attitudes.

## 2. Head Start

Head Start is the largest early childhood education (ECE) program in the United States (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014), with around 239,000 staff members; of which, around one-quarter of the staff are parents of current or former Head Start children (Head Start, 2015). Head Start is a federally funded program with an \$8 billion budget that began in 1965 and provides low-income 3-to-5-year old children and their families with a comprehensive child development program including education, health, nutrition, and social services. Having these comprehensive supports may be beneficial, as research on Head Start agencies suggests that more spending on various Head Start support programs leads to higher academic outcomes in children (Currie & Neidell, 2007).

Head Start has tried to further raise its quality standards by creating several regulations. For example, starting in the fall of 2013, at least 50 percent of Head Start lead teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree, while assistant teachers are required to either possess an associate degree or a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential (PUBLIC LAW 110–134—DEC. 12, 2007). Overall, this educational requirement is being met, as 71% of Head Start teachers have a bachelor's degree or higher, and 96% of Head Start teachers hold an associate degree or higher in ECE or a related field (Head Start, 2015). To further increase quality standards, Head Start was reauthorized in 2007, whereby they now need to compete for funding every 5 years, as well as demonstrate through reliable data, program reviews, and annual audits that their program is meeting or exceeding Head Start standards (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012). This translates into having different management-level staff, such as education, bilingual, mental health, and special needs managers, as well as monitoring teams, continuously visit classrooms throughout the school year to provide not just support, but oversight and monitoring, to ensure quality. Additionally, the Head Start Federal Review Team visits random classrooms once every three years to further ensure the quality of the teaching, among other aspects of the programs performance. Therefore, while many aspects of a Head Start teachers' job may overlap with other preschool teachers, Head Start teachers may differ, as they need to constantly provide proof of the quality of their programs (see Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014). This documentation takes time, and therefore, it may take time away from instructing children.

## 3. Preschool teacher-related factors influencing childcare quality

Preschool children, especially those at-risk (e.g. low income areas), are more likely to attain later school success if they have

high-quality preschool teachers (Early et al., 2007). Beyond preschool teacher turnover, the quality of preschool teachers are affected by a broad range of factors (Holochwost, DeMott, Buell, Yannetta, & Amsden, 2009; Jorde-Bloom, 1988), including their background characteristics, their classroom quality, their workplace environments, and their relationships with others. For example, preschool teachers' *background characteristics*, such as their educational level (McEntire, 2011; Whitebook et al., 2001), attending on-going trainings (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002), and having teaching experience (Brown, Molfese, & Molfese, 2008) can influence the quality of their teaching. However, these factors are not always predictive of preschool teacher quality. For example, some research suggests that the preschool teachers' educational level may not affect their teaching quality (Early et al., 2007). Preschool teachers' salary is also linked with their background characteristics (Whitebook & Sakai, 2003), as more experienced and better-trained preschool teachers tend to earn higher salaries than those with less experience and training (Barnett, 2003). Preschool teachers' salary is viewed as an on-going issue in the United States (Goelman & Guo, 1998; Whitebook & Bellm, 1999), as they are one of the least paid professions (Barnett, 2003). While many preschool teachers do not quit their job due to *only* receiving a low-wage, it does contribute to having negative job attitudes (Hale-Jinks et al., 2006; Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014). However, some research on Head Start teachers suggests that they are generally content with their salary (Wells, 2015). While this may be because Head Start salaries tend to be higher than other preschool teachers' salaries (Currie & Neidell, 2007), other research on incentivizing preschool teachers to stay teaching based on raising their salaries have shown little or null results (Bridges, Fuller, Huang, & Hamre, 2011; Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, & Mauzy, 2007). This suggests that the preschool teachers' commitment to the field is a more important background characteristic than salary (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014; Wells, 2015).

Preschool teachers' *classroom quality*, such as their classroom management, sensitivity, and interactions with children have been well-researched and found to affect children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Mashburn et al., 2008). However, classroom quality may diminish as preschool teachers experience high job demands, poor working conditions, as well as emotional and physical exhaustion (Goelman & Guo, 1998; Rentzou, 2012). The quality of the classrooms may be further diminished as preschool teachers, especially those in Head Start (Bullough et al., 2014), take on more non-teaching tasks. For example, preschool teachers' classroom quality is affected by needing to complete paperwork, as it is associated with teacher stress (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995), and both Head Start teachers (Bullough et al., 2014) and program leaders (Bullough, 2015) find the paperwork irritating and distracting from teaching. Preschool teachers' classroom quality is also lowered when they need to focus on managing children's externalizing behavior problems, rather than focusing on instructing their lessons (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012; Kaiser, Rogers, & Kasper, 1993). However, research shows that with involved and helpful mental health support, preschool teachers can reduce child behavior problems (Raver et al., 2008).

Preschool teachers' *workplace environments* are shaped directly and indirectly by the emotional climate of the center, as well as by program leaders (Zinsser & Curby, 2014; Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Chazan-Cohen, 2016). However, as preschool classrooms, especially Head Start classrooms (Bullough et al., 2014), become more bureaucratized (e.g. more documentation) and have more demands placed on them, preschool teachers may start to feel less satisfied with their employment (Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010). *Workplace relationships* consist of any relationship the preschool teacher has

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