

Head Start Teachers’ Perceptions of Quality: Promoting High-Quality Environments

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INTRODUCTION

Quality in early care and education (ECE) programs has been a critical issue for policymakers and researchers for decades. However, recent quantitative findings indicate mixed associations between features of quality and children’s outcomes (e.g., Hanno et al., 2021; Guerrero-Rosada et al., 2021). Further, Beneke and Love (2022) argue the ECE field needs to move beyond the current definitions of quality and reimagine quality in a way that promotes wholeness and multidimensionality, cultivates access and belonging, and moves away from accountability practices. This reconceptualization may be particularly important within the Head Start context because it typically serves children from diverse backgrounds.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This qualitative study seeks to understand how Head Start teachers conceptualize quality in order to contextualize recent research reporting null findings between classroom quality and child outcomes. Specifically, the study seeks to answer:

How do Head Start teachers define quality?

METHODS

Participants

Ten center-based Head Start teachers from two mid-Atlantic states participated in the study.

- 60% were lead teachers
- 70% of teachers had more than 10 years of teaching experience
- 50% of teachers identified as White and 30% identified as Black or African American
- 50% of teachers had a bachelor’s degree and 20% had a master’s degree

Measure

A semi-structured interview was developed to capture teachers’ perceptions of quality in Head Start. Open-ended questions included:

- Whether teachers’ definitions of quality were similar or different than Head Start’s definition of quality
- Features/characteristics of high- and low-quality Head Start classrooms
- Realistic teacher-child ratios in Head Start

Analytic Plan

Transcripts were coded using a grounded theory and constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Transcripts were coded line by line using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Next, the codes that emerged during open coding were reviewed and grouped into categories that were used for focused coding (Thornberg et al., 2015; Willig & Rogers, 2017). Then, axial coding was employed where initial codes were tested against the larger body of data to determine the representativeness of codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, pattern coding was used to summarize codes into a smaller number of condensed codes (Saldaña, 2021).

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FINDINGS

Meta-Theme: Quality in Head Start Contexts

Alignment with Head Start’s definition of quality

• “Our main goal is basically the same. We want the kids to have the best of everything – whether it’s your quality in cleaning the classroom or your quality in teaching the classroom...”

Child-focused features

• “They get to choose where they learn that day... it’s really important that they learn to like school, so they come in and do what they want to do.”

Structural indicators and policies that impact instruction

• “I definitely think no more than 15 [children]. I think 12 to 15 is a great ratio, and you have more time with the kids!”

High-quality environment

• “Providing a good education. The lesson plans scaffolded... Quality is getting my work done, like lesson plans on time.”

Areas for growth and challenges to implementing high-quality instruction

• “I would love to be able to decide or let my class decide what study we do next. And I also feel the pressure. I’ve gotta make sure I have certain checklists and observations done...”

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study highlight the need to review and revise our ECE standards to reflect the experiences of our current ECE workforce. Teachers identified areas for possible future development of Head Start’s Program Performance Standards, including:

- **More opportunities for child-led learning**
- **Lower teacher-child ratios**
- **Increased autonomy for Head Start teachers**

Incorporating teachers’ voices in Head Start policies and practices can strengthen our ECE workforce and lead to higher-quality learning experiences for our youngest children.

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