

PROJECT BRIEF

Teachers' Nutrition and Healthful Feeding Practices in Child Care and Head Start Classrooms

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Grant or Contract Number: 90YE0185

Period of Funding: Sept. 2016-Sept. 2018

Project Description.

The **overall goal** of the proposed study is to generate new insight that will inform policies and practices related to professional development activities aimed at better equipping early childhood educators to implement evidenced-based best practices associated with healthful nutrition and feeding practices. Three **specific aims** are guiding the study: **1)** To identify the needs of child care and Head Start teachers in regards to nutrition and healthful feeding practices, and to explore how current professional development opportunities are meeting these needs. **2)** To explore child care and Head Start teachers' perceptions of mealtime challenges, and how such challenges may or may not be related to the professional development trainings they receive. **3)** To identify teacher recommendations for the creation of professional development training topics/activities that better address the needs of child care and Head Start teachers within the domain of nutrition and healthful feeding practices.

Research Questions.

Specific Aim 1:

- **Research Question 1a.** What is the relationship between child care and Head Start teachers' knowledge and beliefs about their role in supporting children's nutritional intake and healthful eating?
- **Research Question 1b.** What are the format, content, and processes underlying current professional development activities focused on nutrition and healthful feeding practices, and how are such activities related to child care and Head start teachers' knowledge and beliefs?

Specific Aim 2:

- **Research Question 2a.** What are the challenges that child care and Head Start teachers face during mealtimes in the classrooms?
- **Research Question 2b.** What is the relationship between the mealtime challenges confronted by child care and Head Start teachers and the professional development training they receive in the domain of nutrition and healthful feeding practices?

Specific Aim 3:

- **Research Question 3.** What do child care and Head Start teachers view as being the most salient topics and issues for professional development training initiatives that will better enable them to implement evidence-based best practices for nutrition and healthful feeding?

The overall design of this project is a mixed-methods descriptive study that contains two phases. Phase 1 of this project consists of a nationwide online survey to address research questions pertaining to Specific Aim 1 and Specific Aim 2. Phase 2 of this project will consist of semi-structured interviews with a subset of the sample to address research questions pertaining to Specific Aim 3.

Sample. This project is open to full-time teachers involved in feeding preschool-aged children at a center-based child care or Head Start setting. A total of 1000 teachers will be identified to participate in Phase 1 of the study, with 500 from center-based child care settings and 500 from Head Start classrooms. Phase 2 of the project will include a subset of participants (50 total) from the original sample.

Methods.

Phase 1: Teachers will complete an online survey that takes approximately 45 minutes.

Measures. The online survey will assist in data collection for both Specific Aim 1 and Aim 2. The survey will be constructed by pulling items and scales from five main questionnaires: (1) the Child Care Provider Healthy Eating and Activity Survey (CCPHEA) (Lanigan 2012), (2) the Confidence about Activity and Nutrition (CAN) Teach Questionnaire (Derscheid, Kim, Zittel, Umoren, & Henry, 2014), (3) the About Feeding Children Study survey (Sigman-Grant, Christiansen, Branen, Fletcher, & Johnson, 2008), (4) the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAP SACC) Child Nutrition Self-Assessment (Ward et al., 2014), and (5) *the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)* (Rutkowski, Rutkowski, Belanger, Knoll, Weatherby, & Prusinski, 2013). We will also be adding open-ended questions to further explore child care providers' perceptions.

Analytic plan. Specific Aim 1 A straight-forward approach of using a second-order latent variable model will be pursued, with a second-order latent variable of teachers' feeding practices being regressed onto a second-order latent variable of teachers' knowledge and beliefs.

Specific Aim 2 Due to the nature of the descriptive information that will be collected from the TALIS instrument, descriptive analyses will be conducted using this information.

Additionally, open-ended responses will be analyzed using thematic analysis.

Phase 2: These participants will participate in over the phone interviews that will last approximately 30-60 minutes.

Measures. Semi-structured interviews utilizing an interview guide will be used to explore the professional development needs of teachers in regards to nutrition and healthful feeding practices to provide insight on recommendations for future initiatives. The interview will include questions revolving around three topical areas: 1. challenges faced during mealtimes; 2. previous trainings related to healthful nutrition and feeding

practices; and 3. perceived current needs related to healthful nutrition and feeding practices.

Analytic Plan. To analyze data for this specific aim we will be utilizing qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Progress Update

We have completed recruitment for Phase 1 of the project. Currently, we are analyzing this data and are preparing for recruitment for Phase 2 of the project. Preliminary results show that the majority of preschool teachers place health promotion and childhood obesity prevention as a priority in their role working with children (88%). However, the professional development preschool teachers receive on healthful nutrition and feeding practices is varied. We also see a difference in topics covered in professional development between Head Start and Non-Head Start childcare programs. Further detailed results will be discussed.

Implications for policy/practice

Within this projects' overarching goal, there are two key implications, 1) provide insight on framing professional development activities to target efforts on what early childhood educators will need, and 2) inform policymakers on directions of focus and content of professional development initiatives for early childhood educators in the areas of nutrition and healthful feeding practices.

Implications for research

Through the projects' mixed methods design, it will allow us to both quantify and provide rich documentation of early childhood educators' views on the professional development they participate in.

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