

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Head Start Parents' Views on Family-Centered Care: A Research to Practice Summary

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This study looked at components of Head Start parent-teacher relationships: teachers' knowledge and use of family-centered practices. Specifically, the purpose of the research was to examine the perspective of Head Start parents and to better understand their classroom experiences as they relate to family-centered care. Family-centered classroom practices and family-specific knowledge are two important components of developing effective parent-teacher relationships. The study used a national sample of Head Start teachers and parents. Results suggest that parents and teachers tend to agree consistently on their perceptions of family-centered practices and responsiveness, across a variety of classroom settings. These results point to the importance of continuing to support teachers' professional and family-specific substantive knowledge in order to promote positive relationships with families.

Keywords: early childhood education, Head Start, parent-teacher relationships

INTRODUCTION

Family engagement is a key component of early childhood education and has long been a focus in the performance standards of our nation's largest publicly funded preschool program, Head Start (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Family engagement is a multidimensional construct that encompasses a variety of behaviors in which parents and the family unit play an active role in engaging in and enhancing their children's learning experiences (Epstein, 1995). There's a robust literature base around the benefits of family engagement on children's academic, as well as, social and emotional outcomes (Barnard, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003).

Although family engagement is frequently discussed as school-based behaviors (e.g. parents volunteering in the classroom), family engagement models have moved towards incorporating home-based behaviors, such as parents extending classroom learning into the home. These more recent models have moved towards highlighting parents' active role in facilitating the home-school

connection (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). At the same time, there has been an increasing recognition of the role that teachers play in cultivating a strong and positive relationship with families that can further promote parents' engagement and comfort in interacting with the school system, therefore enhancing children's learning (Herman & Reinke, 2017; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009).

This research has, for the most part, paid little attention to the backgrounds and characteristics of teachers who are more skilled in utilizing family-centered practices (FCPs) and has wholly disregarded parents' perspectives. Instead, most studies of family engagement and FCPs rely on teachers' perspectives and self-reported behaviors. FCPs are also often described as a static component of the classroom and universally implemented for all children and families (Trivette et al., 2010). In practice, however, FCPs are supposed to be individualized, flexible, and responsive to each family's unique circumstances (Ramos et al., 2015). Given the increasing diversity of families served by early care and education, it is unclear how similar families' experiences of FCPs are within the same classroom and whether and how the racial and ethnic composition of a classroom is associated with parents' and teachers' reports of FCP use. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by focusing on identifying teacher professional characteristics that relate to how parents perceive their relationships with their classroom teachers across a variety of classroom contexts.

Of similar importance, another factor related to how parents and teachers form effective relationships is the level of knowledge parents share about their own culture and family rearing practices (i.e. family-centered knowledge) with their classroom teachers. When parents and teachers engage in ongoing communication, it encourages teachers to engage in more responsive practices and to be more attentive to family needs (Bromer et al., 2011). Establishing a solid parent-teacher relationship promotes ongoing interactions and communication that empowers both teachers and parents (Swick, 2004). Therefore, it's critical for teachers to cultivate high-quality interpersonal relationships with parents in order to support parent engagement and foster trust with families.

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of our study was to explore teacher characteristics that may influence parents' perceptions of their teaching practices related to family-centeredness and responsiveness. We had four research questions:

1. What teacher personal and professional characteristics predict parents' perceptions of family-centered practices?
2. To what extent does classroom composition influence parents' perceptions of family centered practices?
3. What teacher personal and professional characteristics predict parents' perceptions of family-specific knowledge?
4. To what extent does classroom composition influence parents' perceptions of family-specific knowledge utilization?

In order to examine and answer these research questions, we used secondary analysis of parent and teacher survey data collected through the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES 2014-215 cohort). FACES 2014 was a nationally representative study of Head Start programs, teachers, children, and families.

The participants in our sample included 227 Head Start teachers and 474 parents who completed the FPTRQ questionnaires and demographic surveys. In order to examine these research questions, we completed hierarchical linear models to examine teacher characteristics that predicted parents' perceptions of family-centered practices, and perceptions of family-specific knowledge utilized by their classroom teacher separately. We examined these teacher characteristics as predictors: teacher's level of education, years of experience, training, race and ethnicity, and self-reported family-centered practices.

KEY FINDINGS

When examining the relationship between our key variables via correlations, teachers who reported greater levels of education also reported having more teaching experience, endorsed attending training in supporting dual-language/diverse learners, and also reported utilizing a greater number of family-centered practices in their classroom. Conversely, these teacher characteristics (education, years of experience, training, and self-reported practices) were not associated with parents' perception of teachers' use of family-centered practices or parents' perceptions of responsiveness in teaching, displaying or utilizing family-specific knowledge to engage parents.

Alternatively, parents' perceptions of family-specific knowledge was associated with perceptions of family-centered practices. Meaning when parents when parents' felt comfortable disclosing family-specific information with their classroom teacher (e.g. "How comfortable would or do you feel sharing with your childcare provider or teacher your employment status"), they also reported higher levels of family-centered practices displayed by their classroom teacher (i.e. collaborating, communicating, or responsive to families needs).

When examining our research questions, we ran hierarchical linear models. Through these models we did not find that teachers' demographic or professional characteristics significantly predicted higher family-centered practice or family-specific knowledge as reported by parents. When examining the role of the racial/ethnic composition of the students across Head Start classrooms, we found a significant interaction between teachers' self-reported family-centered practices and parents' perceptions of these practices. Meaning, the classroom had a differential effect on parents and teachers agreement and convergence around these practices. Moreover, there is a higher convergence in agreement between teachers and parents in classrooms where there is lesser degree of diversity among the children. Conversely, there is lower agreement between parents and teachers in classrooms with higher heterogeneity and racial diversity.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers and parents play an important role in ensuring all children are thriving. Specifically, teachers are tasked with creating a welcoming environment, engaging in family-centered practices in order to engage parents, and develop trusting relationships with families in order to have the individualized tools to support the families and children they serve. In this study, we examined the factors that may contribute to parents' perceptions of family-responsive practices, as well as parents' comfort in disclosing family-specific knowledge. We found a difference in the way parents and teachers perceived family-centered activities across different classroom contexts. Additionally, we did not find significant predictors of family-centered practices or family-specific knowledge related to teachers' education and professional development training.

This highlights the importance of ensuring Head Start teachers are adequately trained to support the diversity of families they serve. When parents and teachers are able to collaborate, build trust, and develop open and ongoing communication, children and families are better supported. With this in mind, Head Start is a leading program that serves over a million children a year. Through consistent implementation of their family engagement practices, they serve as an example for early childhood programs across the country. This study sheds light on the complexities of fostering and developing high quality parent-teacher relationships. This study only focused on parents' perceptions of family-centered care and their perceptions of comfort in disclosing family-specific knowledge. Moving forward, Head Start programs can continue to support families by creating welcoming environments, and adequately supporting teachers with family-focused professional development. These ongoing learning opportunities could include additional training, peer-coaching, and education about reciprocal communication and family engagement. Our results suggest that although teachers' might believe that they are engaging in family responsive practices, they are not always consistent or explicit when we ask parents about their experiences.

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