

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What You Can Accomplish in a Year: Head Start Teachers' Decisions about Teaching

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This ethnographic study of teacher decision making in an Appalachian Head Start program suggests that teachers use personal and practical knowledge to inform their daily teaching while professional experiences appear less influential. Teachers are also influenced by their relationships in the community as they make use of community funds of knowledge to inform how and what they teach. Finally, external influences including administrative decisions and the social, economic and political circumstances in their community and in society influenced how they make instructional decisions. The importance of a deep understanding of how teachers make decisions about classroom practice is apparent. Findings from the study are discussed as they relate to Head Start policies and practice and how curriculum change may occur.

Keywords: teacher decision-making, funds of knowledge, sociocultural context, Head Start

Head Start, the nation's flagship intervention effort on behalf of low-income preschool children and their families, has intensified its focus on reducing the academic readiness gap between preschool children from low income families and their middle class peers (Head Start Approach to School Readiness, 2011). This focus reflects the increasing attention of researchers and policy makers on the persistent problems children in poverty have had performing well in school. Despite a decade long emphasis on raising the achievement of all America's children (Lee & Burkham, 2002; Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007; Neuman, 2006) little substantial progress in improving the achievement of children from low-income families has been demonstrated and the gap between them and their middle-class peers has been described as a disturbing and defining fixture of American schooling for at least 40 years (Neuman, 2008). Increasingly, policy makers

have turned to intensifying academic readiness instruction as a means of improving child outcomes for all children.

The emphasis on improving children's academic readiness has been accompanied by increasing scrutiny on the educational background of Head Start teachers (Barnett, 2002; Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Traditionally, many Head Start teachers were hired because they were members of the community a Head Start program served and, in fact, many Head Start teachers began in the program as parents of the children attending (Glod, 2007; Vinovskis, 2008; Zigler & Styfco, 2010). While national data on the number of Head Start parents who become Head Start teachers is not readily available, it is estimated that Head Start programs have provided employment opportunities for hundreds of thousands of current and former parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). In California and Colorado, approximately 28% of Head Start employees are current or former Head Start parents (California Head Start Association, 2011; Colorado Head Start Association, 2011)

While the numbers of low-income individuals, mostly women, who have been lifted out of poverty by the career portal and the opportunity for professional advancement provided by Head Start is a beneficial outcome of the program, it is often unacknowledged in the discussion about ways to improve teacher quality. It is estimated that approximately 30 percent of Head Start teachers hold bachelor's degrees, another 30 percent of teachers have associate's degrees and about 40 percent of Head Start teachers having neither (Office of Head Start, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010.) The percentages of Head Start teachers with degrees have increased since earlier reports (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993) but the most recent reauthorization of the program requires that all teachers have at least an associate's degree and 50% must have a bachelor's degree by 2013 (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007). Given the estimated numbers of Head Start teachers who must seek additional education, these requirements are likely to have considerable impact on Head Start programs. While professional development is important for improving teacher quality, increasing educational requirements for Head Start teachers in particular tends to ignore the fact that research has failed to unequivocally establish the relationship between teachers' educational background and child outcomes in early childhood (Guskey, 2003; Haskins & Loeb, 2007; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006)

A growing body of research suggests that teacher characteristics more proximal to their relationships with children, families and the communities play a primary role in fostering children's school readiness. These characteristics include the quality of the child-teacher relationship, knowledge about the community, the curriculum used in the classroom and teacher attitudes and beliefs about early childhood education (Domitrovich et al., 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Pianta, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). The role of teacher beliefs and their relationship to instructional decision-making suggests that teachers are influenced in their daily decisions about classroom practice in multiple ways and that professional training may be only one such factors (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Hawken, Johnson, & McDonnell, 2005; Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Pajares, 1992).

In the manuscript that follows we describe research that sought to understand how Head Start teachers make instructional decisions on a daily basis. We wanted to explore the relationships between Head Start teachers' professional, practical and personal experiences and their decisions (Grisham, 2000; Vacca et al., 2003). We also wanted to examine how the context of their teaching within the Head Start program and the community they lived in influenced their

decisions, seeking to deepen our understanding of how the teachers were influenced by the sociocultural aspects of their lives (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998).

The current study was embedded within a longitudinal experimental multi-site implementation study of Children's School Success (CSS), a comprehensive preschool curriculum based on evidence-based practices and designed to address the needs of preschool children at risk for school failure as English language learners, with diagnosed disability or from low-income families (Odom et.al., 2003). All three of the authors of the current study were well-known in the Head Start program described as we provided CSS training and support, observed teachers during implementation of CSS, and actively sought to assist in implementation of the curriculum within the Head Start program across the six years of the study.

The eleven Head Start teachers in the current study participated actively in the CSS study for two years, initially in the control group and then as implementation teachers of CSS the following year. Having volunteered to participate in the study, all but one of the teachers were conscientious about using CSS during implementation. However, although most of the teachers continued to use parts of CSS as their participation in the larger study ended, only one of the teachers continued to use it in its entirety in subsequent years, opting instead to return to their previous teaching practices. We have written previously about the research we engaged in to understand why teachers failed to continue using CSS (Butera, Palmer, Lieber, & Schneider, 2009; Lieber et.al., 2009). In this manuscript we examine how the Head Start teachers describe their instructional decision-making throughout the six-year period of the study, both before, during and after CSS implementation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We used two theoretical frameworks to guide our interpretation of the data. First, we used the literature on teacher beliefs. Beliefs can be defined as the knowledge or ideas that an individual accepts as true (Evans, Fox, Cremaso, & McKinnon, 2004). In the context of teaching, beliefs may lead educators to question aspects of curriculum such as the value of the information contained within or the validity of the knowledge content (Fives & Buehl, 2008). Deford (1985) drew attention to this area through a study of 14 elementary teachers, finding that there was a strong correlation between teachers' self reported beliefs and their observed practices. Subsequent research has validated this finding, strengthening the assertion that teachers' beliefs can be a powerful indicator of instructional practices (Hawken et al., 2005; Hindman & Wasik, 2008; McMahon, Richmond, & Reeves-Kazelskis, 1998; Reutzell & Sabey, 1996; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991).

Vacca et al. (2003) proposed that the examination of a teacher's professional, practical, and personal knowledge provides insight into beliefs. Professional knowledge is defined as formal academic training, often in conjunction with a degree or certification. Practical knowledge includes information that is learned on the job that grows with experience. Personal knowledge refers to beliefs developed through individual life experiences. The influence of the experiences leading to these various types of knowledge informs teachers' beliefs and may result in their questioning the value of information given to them. Professional, practical and personal knowledge underlie a teacher's assumptions about their teaching and student learning.

We also employed the work of Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) who describe how teachers may draw on their knowledge of the community and the families of the children they

teach in order to make instructional decisions. In particular, in the current study we sought to understand and describe teachers' "funds of knowledge", defined as an individual's "essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information ...use[d] to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 21). In our research we sought to uncover how and when teachers made use of their contextual knowledge about the community in which they and the children in their classrooms lived. In this processual approach to culture, everyday activities are used as a frame of reference. Therefore, instead of trying to identify the shared cultural norms of the Head Start teachers we studied, we viewed what they did in their teaching and how they explained their decisions as reflective of the sociocultural context in which they lived and worked. Although shared norms about individual behavior sometimes emerged, we focused on teachers' everyday practices as dynamic, emergent and interactional (Gonzalez, 2005).

METHODS

Setting and Participants

The Head Start program studied serves children and families across four counties within a rural Appalachian state. Like the rest of the region, the rugged mountainous terrain has isolated communities and tended to restrict economic growth. Communities struggle with high unemployment and the per capita income is substantially below national averages. Under these circumstances, the needs of children and families poverty are particularly difficult to address, as there is an absolute shortage of resources throughout the region. The Head Start program we studied has been in existence since the 1960s when it initially began as part of a Community Action Program. It is now independently administered by a community-based board of directors and serves over 250 mostly Caucasian children and families in center and home-based programs. The program has collaborative agreements with other community-based educational and social service programs, notably the school district with which it operates a joint preschool program for children with disabilities. The program is well-thought of in the community and receives high-quality reviews from the regional Head Start office.

Over six years, we examined the instructional decision making of eleven Head Start teachers within this program. All of the teachers were experienced (between 7-28 years) and were born and raised in the four county region. Half of the teachers were grandmothers and all were mothers. Six had had children in the program, had volunteered in their child's classroom and were subsequently hired as an assistant teacher in the program before becoming lead teachers in the program. Eight had high school diplomas and had also completed Child Development Associates (CDA) credentialing, and one had completed a two-year associates degree in early childhood and CDA. Five were enrolled in course work in early childhood education at a local community college. The other five were not planning to pursue additional education although they were aware of the new educational requirements for Head Start teachers.

TABLE 1
Demographic Information About the Head Start Teachers

Name	Age	Classroom Experience in Years	Highest Level of Education
#Miranda	66	25	HS
#Fanny	64	20	HS
#Veronica	69	17	HS, CDA
Bree	59	28	HS, CDA
Ella	58	25	HS, CDA
Cynthia	61	23	HS, CDA
#Beth	40	12	HS, CDA*
Diane	39	7	HS, CDA*
#Pam	57	16	HS, CDA*
#Sherry	43	9	HS, CDA*
#Valerie	54	13	AA, CDA*

Note. AA = Two Year Associates Degree; CDA = Child Development Associates Credential; HS = High School; * = currently enrolled in coursework; # = former Head Start parent

Undertaking the Study

Data including classroom observations, interviews and artifacts were collected over five years in conjunction with the CSS project (Odom et al., 2003) and an additional year after that study ended. Classroom observation lasted at least half a day (between 2-4 hours) monthly during the year the teacher was implementing the CSS curriculum. In the remaining five years, teachers were observed twice a year. Detailed field notes were taken within the classroom and included summaries of informal discussions with the teachers. Observation field notes were subsequently typed and filed in a binder for each teacher. An average of forty-two half-day observations were documented in each teacher's classroom.

Teacher interviews were conducted 2-3 times each year and focused on asking teachers to expand on events we had observed in the classroom as we sought to understand the teachers' experiences both in the community and within the program. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and filed in the teacher's designated binder. Interviews ranged in length from thirty minutes to an hour. In total, forty-seven interviews were conducted.

In order to deepen our understanding of the context of teachers' instructional decisions, we employed snowball sampling, interviewing individuals nominated by others as likely to help us "understand the children, families and the community and the program." Sixteen additional interviews occurred with Head Start staff members including curriculum coordinators, family service workers, program administrators and the program director. We also interviewed seven nominated family and community members.

Artifacts were collected that were viewed as relevant to understanding the context of teachers' instructional decisions. Artifacts included including classroom newsletters, children's projects, family meeting topics and handouts, minutes of meetings within the program and lesson plans. We also collected classroom correspondence when offered including notes between teachers and between parents and teachers.

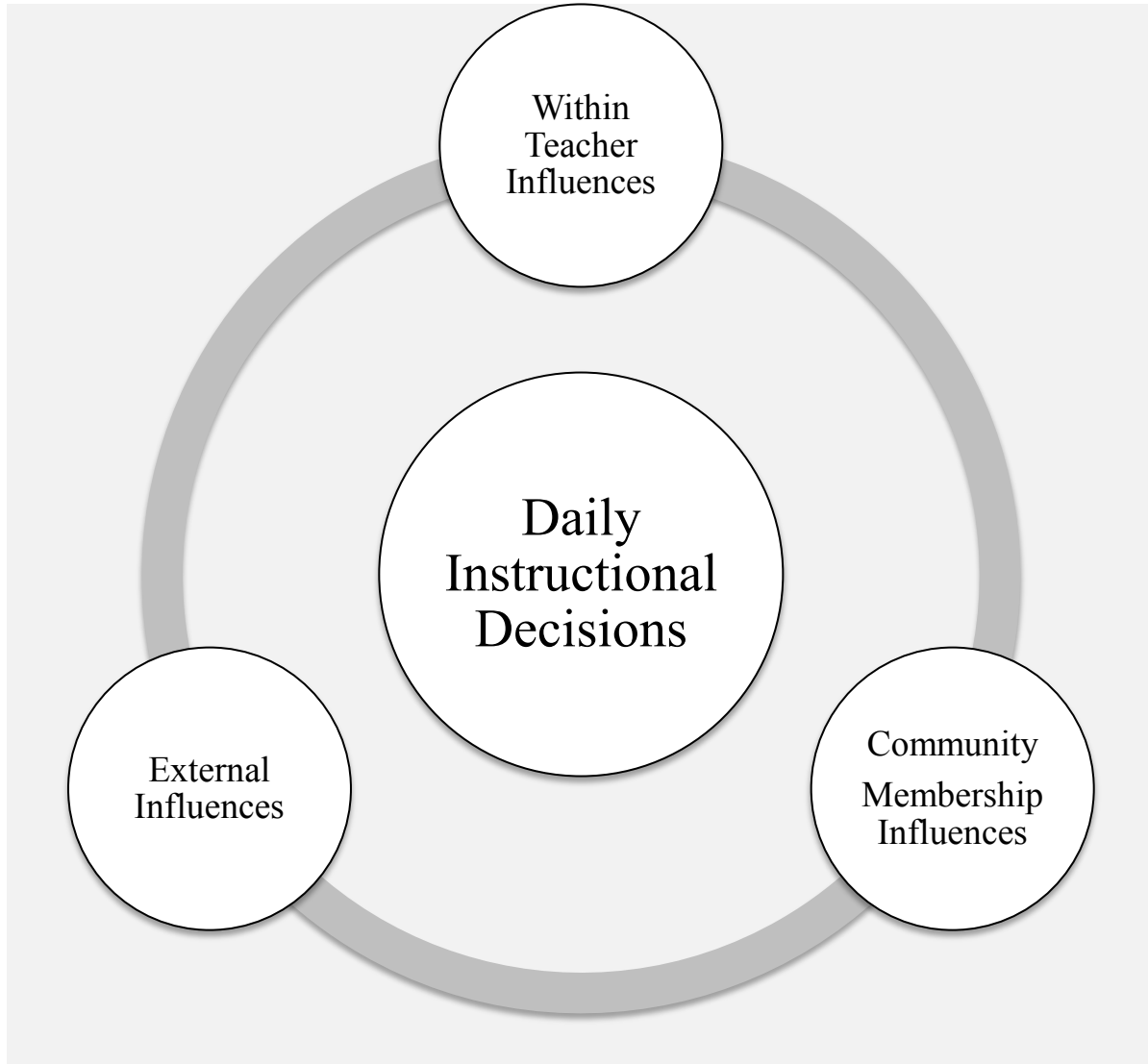
Employing an emerging design, a case study narrative was written after each year for the first four years of the study. The goal of these narratives was to tell the story of that year, highlighting key events and observations. A cross-case analysis was then conducted by two of the researchers in which data relevant to instructional decision-making was coded and organized according to recurring themes across cases (Merriam 1998; Yin 2008). Using these emerging data, three additional observations and interviews were conducted with three of the teachers to inform our emerging hypotheses and theoretical framework in year five of the study. In the final year, we sought to validate our emerging findings and actively seek examples that were inconsistent and question the results. A final full day observation was conducted in all classrooms and all the teachers were individually interviewed again. Questions specific to the emerging themes were discussed. We also conducted two focus groups, one with three of the teachers and their site supervisor, and the other with two teachers and a family service worker. The director, site supervisors, and one of the family service workers were also interviewed again.

Incorporating these new data, we organized findings into segments including teachers' decisions, their explanations of them and influencing factors. Using recursive analysis, we engaged in continuous discovery during initial stages of the study, categorizing and ordering the data, assessing the trustworthiness of emerging themes by identifying initial themes and testing them against the data. Prolonged engagement in the field allowed us to conduct informal member checking across time as we discussed our emerging findings with Head Start teachers and other study participants. Triangulating results across data types, researchers and years further strengthened trustworthiness of our findings (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2008).

RESULTS

The recursive analysis of our data yielded ten emerging themes that were organized into three categories framing how the Head Start teachers we studied described the influences on their decisions about daily instructional practices. First, Head Start teachers' decisions were influenced by their beliefs about children, the purposes of Head Start and their own role in it. Personal and practical knowledge was valued and informed their decision making, while professional experiences were described as less influential. We categorized these themes as **Within Teacher Influences**. Second, teachers made decisions based on their membership in the community both within the Head Start program and in a more general sense. The teachers' relationships with others, including the children in their classroom, parents, community members and other teachers influenced their decision-making. We described these as **Community Membership Influences**. Finally, teachers' decisions were influenced by external factors including administrative decisions within the program and Head Start policies that impacted the program as a whole. Teachers were also affected by social, economic and political circumstances in their community and these factors influenced their teaching. We categorized these themes as **External Influences**.

Sociocultural values and beliefs were evident across the three categories of the data and emerged as influential in how the Head Start teachers we studied made decisions about classroom activities. As illustrated in Figure 1, it became apparent that the teachers' sociocultural context was an important, overarching influence and that their knowledge and experiences within this context played an important role in informing their daily instructional activities.



Within Teacher Influences

The Head Start teachers were influenced in their daily instructional decision-making by the beliefs they held about children's development and the role of Head Start in supporting it. This was evident across many interviews and discussions with them in which they emphasized the importance of allowing ample time for play and social interaction so that children's self-confidence and social competence could develop. Academic readiness instruction was seen as less critical. As Bree explained it,

I think they [the students] just need more social skills, time to build up some of those skills. And just little things like cutting, coloring, things they can do during play. And you introduce all of the alphabet and numbers and all that, but I do not think it should be the main focus.

The teachers' beliefs about the importance of play and social interaction were evident in their classrooms' schedules. Prominently displayed in each classroom, it was not unusual for a typical day's agenda to include large blocks of time for eating breakfast and lunch, playing in classroom centers such as blocks, cars, kitchen, and sand, and playing outside on the playground equipment. The limited time allocated for academic instruction was consistent with the teachers' views that academic skills were not an important priority in the classroom. Although the time allocated for academic readiness instruction varied from class to class it never amounted to more than 60 minutes of a four hour day on the posted schedules. Most observations demonstrated that substantially less time than was posted in class schedules was devoted to academic readiness instruction.

Given these circumstances, it was not surprising that the increased focus on academic readiness in Head Start was described as inappropriate by the teachers. While talking to us about her experiences as a mother, Ella explained that pushing children too hard "was dangerous" and that they "lost their childhood." Cynthia told us that the increased focus on academic readiness in Head Start was "a big mistake" as the children "are just learning how to deal with each other". She wondered about what the emphasis in kindergarten should be if Head Start emphasized academic readiness. Only Beth, of all the teachers in our study, felt that an increasing focus on academic readiness was important. However, Beth consistently described academic readiness rather narrowly, consisting mostly of literacy skills. Furthermore she organized her classroom in ways that were consistent with the other teachers and spent little actual classroom time on academic readiness instruction.

In turn, the teachers described their priorities and what they viewed as the important role of Head Start as providing a safe and nurturing environment in which children could develop social-emotional competence. Like many preschool classrooms, signs in activity centers (such as the block area) explained the skills children were to learn there. Emphasized in handprinted bold print on laminated tagboard in each teacher's room was the importance of learning to share and cooperate and play with one another as one of the first priorities in each classroom center. Adults supervising in the centers demonstrated this priority, usually by facilitating children's play with one another, encouraging them to "share" or "be a friend."

When academic readiness was the ostensible focus of a classroom activity, teachers in our study often focused on the social-emotional aspects of it. Storybook reading, for example, also became a time to ensure that children felt cared for as adults read with children on their laps or in close proximity to them. Veronica explained this by telling us, "If they [children] come in and they haven't been cuddled and read to, then we have to do that. Cuddle and read to them. It is important... Vital really."

In contrast to the importance the Head Start teachers in our study placed on the development of social-emotional competence, teachers did not seem especially concerned when children did not appear to be acquiring academic readiness. When asked in an interview if she thought there were any children who were having difficulty acquiring the skills needed for kindergarten, Sherry responded, "I don't know. Probably a few." In Diane's classroom we asked about a three year old child who had very limited speech. Diane told us that she had noticed his problems and she "might talk to the family about it". However, she also said that he was probably "learning in his own way". Similarly, Cynthia described a child in her classroom as one for whom "she had a gut feeling something wasn't right". One day she discussed his lack of progress with another teacher and with us. The two teachers and wondered whether they should refer him to the school district for more help when we suggested it. Neither teacher was

confident about how to go about doing that and they ended the conversation about the child by assuring us and each other that he would learn when he was ready.

The notion that children will learn when they are ready and that it was a mistake to offer academic readiness instruction too early was a widely-held belief among the Head Start teachers we studied. This belief seemed associated with protecting children from experiencing difficulties that might undermine their social-emotional well-being. In the interview excerpt below, Bree briefly considers the role of added instruction for children who appear to need it.

Well, I think about those that are going to pick it up just like that...and then there are those that don't grasp it as quickly. You know, you might need to sit down and do a little one-on-one with them. Some of them get it in the group and then there are those that I have in the classroom that, no matter what I do, I know they are not going to get it...I try to give them little things because I want them to feel good about what they can do, even if it is not right...they should feel good and be praised for it.

Personal Knowledge. When reflecting about their instructional decisions, the Head Start teachers we studied often referenced their personal experience and the knowledge they had gained from it. As all of them were mothers and many grandmothers, it was common for stories of their children and grandchildren to surface in their rationale for instructional decisions. Beth often described her daughters as very different from one another. She often thought of her daughters' differences when deciding how to arrange classroom center activities, planning some for children "who liked to play with one another like Lucia" and others for children who "like to be by themselves, like Andrea." Veronica pointed out that she had read to her grandson "almost every day of this life". She was quite active in recruiting adult volunteers to come in her classroom to read. These reading sessions almost always occurred during free play when the adult volunteer (often elderly) was invited to sit in a rocker with children on his/her lap and other children gathered at his/her feet. Diane told us about how her daughter who "just loves animals" had been given a pig and that she was "learning so much from taking care of him." In turn, Diane had classroom pets and gave the children responsibility for their care. Ella reported watching her granddaughter struggle with academic instruction in kindergarten. Over time, this seemed to intensify her belief in the importance of providing children with opportunities to play and she seemed less inclined to engage in academic readiness instruction.

Practical Knowledge. The Head Start teachers we studied frequently referenced their practical experience in the classroom to explain their instructional decisions. In many instances, activities that had been successful in the past had become so routine to the teachers that they were no longer aware of their specific rationale for them, telling us, "We've always done it this way." Or "it seems to have worked really well over the years." However, they also made use of their practical experience to solve problems in their classroom, particularly the problems posed by children's challenging behaviors. Bree described trying to help Charlie manage his behaviors by using strategies she had used in the past, moving him to sit beside better-behaved children at lunch and providing him with a stamp on his hand for being attentive. She recalled how this had worked in the past, explaining "I've had parents before who say, 'don't stamp my kid's hand.' Some parents don't like them. I haven't had anybody say anything this year, so we'll see."

Like Bree, Valarie used her practical experience to solve a teaching problem. Raeanne in Valarie's class was much ahead of the other children.

She's learned the letters of the alphabet and she knows the sounds that they make. She can spell her first and her last name. She knows her colors, She can count to thirty, She can do patterns... She plays well with the other children. She's very helpful.

Valarie paired Raeanne with children who needed help for classroom activities, having used this strategy in the past with children who “are just ahead of the others... it teaches them to help.”

Professional Knowledge. In contrast to their use of personal and practical knowledge, the Head Start teachers in our study did not value the professional experiences they had had nor did they reference them to explain why they made instructional decisions. Although several were currently enrolled in early childhood education coursework at a local community college, they tended to dismiss what they had learned there as “what we have to do to keep our jobs.” There was similar consensus about the professional development they had received through the Head Start program, which was described as “useless” and a “waste of time” unless it included learning new art or music activities for the classrooms. The Head Start teachers in our study were aware that they were considered as less than qualified by their fully-credentialed public school counterparts. They resented the apparent assumptions that they were not good teachers because they lacked formal professional training and they insisted that professional training played a limited role in understanding how to be a teacher. This sentiment was articulated by Fanny:

It's hard because I think that teachers with a four-year degree think that Head Start teachers do not know that much because we do not have that piece of paper. Even if we have two years. That is nothing. And you know, to me having 18 or 23 years of experience is a lot better than a piece of paper. I mean, we've taken algebra. We've taken biology. We've taken educational classes. But you know, I really feel that is how they feel, that we are not as competent.

Community Membership Influences

The instructional decisions made by the Head Start teachers we studied were influenced by their interpersonal relationships, both within the program and as members of the community in which they lived. In many instances these relationships proved complimentary and provided resources for the teachers in making instructional decisions. For example, Diane and Pam were self proclaimed “best friends” and taught in classrooms next to each other. They were frequently observed discussing and planning activities together both before and after the school day. This same sort of friendship was apparent with Veronica, Bree, and Ella who had been friends for years. Ella explained

When I first started, Miss Bree worked for Head Start and we were neighbors. We would talk. We knew each other before...Yes, Miss Bree, Miss Veronica, and myself. Our children all went to school together and graduated together.

All of the teachers in our study told us they “were born and raised here”. As community members, they were deeply embedded in the social life of the community, often kin to some of the children in their classrooms and it was not uncommon for children in their classrooms to be the offspring of children they had taught years earlier. Because they knew well the families of the children in their classrooms, they made use of this knowledge to relate to the children and plan activities. Mothers, dropping their children off in the classroom talked with the teachers about their lives and community events. The teachers sometimes used these events for instructional activities, although they were seldom planned. One example of this occurred in Ella’s classroom, when a mother brought her child to Head Start a little late, holding her newborn in her arms. Ella expressed delight at seeing the new baby and asked the mother to join the classroom circle time and show the seated children the new baby boy. The children were fascinated by the baby and asked questions about caring for him. Ella spontaneously turned the event into a lesson about the importance of nutrition and hygiene even as she also emphasized the importance of helping family members and sharing toys.

Miranda provided another example of how the teachers in our study made use of the close connections they had with the families of their children. During March of one year Miranda’s room and the hallway outside of it was filled with art projects made from toothpicks, pieces of yarn and cardboard as well as green and gold glitter. Miranda explained that these were leprechaun traps made at home by the children with their parents and brought to school. Next to each “trap” was a photograph of the child and a parent/parents/grandparent proudly holding the trap, taken during a classroom “family day”. It was noteworthy that an adult family member was in attendance for nearly every child in the classroom at these monthly family events. As Miranda told us:

I explain it on the first home visit and I tell the parents you know I expect this from you. Because you know you are your child’s teacher... I come right out and tell the parents you know right flat out. I want your participation at least once a month. If you can’t come to a parent meeting, if you can’t attend an activity, then you need to do this.”

It is important to note that the activities Miranda sent home for the parents and children to do together often reflected what she knew about the families and the community of the children she taught. In the case of the leprechaun traps, for example, Miranda capitalized on the fact that many families in the community supplemented their diet by hunting and fishing. Making a trap to catch a leprechaun, therefore, was a craft that built on community funds of knowledge. Miranda also realized the importance of involving parents in the learning of their children and was encouraged by her success. She told us:

I’ve had parents send me... notes ...after they did the first family project that they enjoyed doing it. And, in fact some of the parents are going to frame the ones they send in to me. Yeah, and the parents feel proud when they come in and they see the stuff hanging out in the hallway...it gives them a sense of being and belonging.

The strong connections between the Head Start teachers we studied and the community led to other planned instructional activities. For example, Veronica’s son was a volunteer fireman and she recruited him and others to come to the classroom in a fire truck, resplendent in firefighting gear. This was well-received by all the children at her center and the teachers talked

about the importance of volunteering to help others. In another instance, Fanny recruited a member of her church to attend the classrooms in her center to tell the children about how he had been recruited to play baseball for a major league team after playing for years in the community's t-ball and little league programs. The teachers emphasized how important the young man's baseball experiences in the community early in his life had been to his success.

The teachers' connections to the community sometimes facilitated the instructional planning they accomplished with their public school counterparts as part of the Head Start program's effort to collaborate with the public schools. For example, as Head Start teachers, both Valarie and Beth co-taught in classrooms with public preschool teachers as part of the collaboration between Head Start and the public schools. After struggling at the beginning of the school year, both ended the school year successfully sharing the teaching responsibilities with their public school counterparts who they knew well in the community. Asked about how she made instructional decisions with her co teacher, Valarie described her co-teacher's beliefs as "complimentary" to her own and explained that they reviewed their plans at "church sometimes." Beth explained that it was not hard to co-teach with her public school partner who was "wonderful because she really loves kids and knows how to get to their level." Beth then told us about how the co-teacher had a child at home who often played with Beth's daughters.

While relationships with others in the community allowed the teachers to access community funds of knowledge to make decisions about their teaching, there were instances when relationships in the community did not facilitate their work. Jolene, a public school special education teacher worked a half day several days a week was assigned to work part-time with Bree during the study. Although Jolene understood her role as specifically focused on the children with identified disabilities in the classroom, both she and Bree were asked to co-teach all of the children in order to help ensure children's readiness for kindergarten. The two teachers differed in what they thought was appropriate instruction for the children they taught. Bree continued to place a high priority on play while Jolene favored providing the children with discrete instruction focusing on academic readiness skills. However, difficulties between the two women were made more problematic by the fact that, years earlier, they had been members of the same church and were involved on opposite sides of a bitter debate about church policies. Bree's discussed her feelings with Ella and Veronica, rehashing the church debate while also discussing her feeling about Jolene. The three women concluded that Jolene viewed them as less qualified as teachers and they described her as "uppity." As a consequence, although they were polite to her at the center, they seldom engaged in any friendly conversation with her during breaks or lunch. For her part, Jolene made a credible effort to establish a working relationship with Bree and the others but, after repeated efforts were rejected, she gave up. Bree maintained her position as the lead teacher in the classroom and play continued to be the important priority of the classroom's activities. Jolene assumed a secondary teaching role and she began to instruct children with disabilities in the hallway for part of each day. When in the classroom, she and Bree were consistently observed teaching at opposite sides of the classroom and Jolene left the building immediately after she finished teaching.

External Influences

The Head Start teachers in our study were affected by administrative policies and procedures coming from the local program's administrators that the teachers often did not understand and

felt unable to influence. A prime example of this occurred as the central office attempted to standardize the curriculum and implement progress monitoring across the classrooms during the years the teachers were not participating in CSS. The teachers were given weekly curriculum guidelines they were to use to write lesson plans to be sent to the central office. They were also required to file periodic reports on the children, which were also to be sent electronically to the central office. The teachers complied, completing paperwork for which they received little feedback and they seldom used to guide their teaching. Under these circumstances, the teachers resented the time required to comply with central office demands. While on the surface, these procedures seemed to have little impact on teachers daily instructional decision making, in essence it did because the time required could have been used for authentic instructional planning. Fanny explained that she used her personal time to complete the required paperwork which she did not especially view as valuable:

Because you know you have your write-up's to do and now we enter all of that information onto the computer and most of the time I take that home and do it. I do my entering and write ups at home and the checkpoints and all of that kind of stuff.

Community connections and common history among the teachers and the program administrators sometimes lead to miscommunication within the program, created resentment and influenced how teachers made decisions about their teaching. This was readily apparent in the program's initial decision to participate in the CSS study. Although we were assured that the teachers we studied volunteered to use the CSS curriculum and participate in the study, it quickly became evident that several felt pressured to do so and ultimately had "volunteered" under duress. Under these circumstances, although most of the teachers were diligent about using CSS during their implementation year, it is hardly surprising that they did not appear to enjoy it and quickly gave it up when free to do so.

It is important to note that the local Head Start program administrators also described resenting the requirement to follow policies and procedures coming from the "regional or national office" and, like the Head Start teachers, they felt little ownership. Not understanding the rationale for new policies and procedures themselves, administrators passed them along to the Head Start teachers with little accompanying explanation. Both program administrators and teachers described feeling powerless in the process as little opportunity for flexibility was perceived. It was not clear whether flexibility was in fact available even when complying with requirements was quite problematic. For example, the Head Start teachers we studied struggled to complete their required home visits within the first fifty days of the year across a large geographic region with many families living in remote locations on winding mountain roads. Meeting the requirement necessitated hours of teachers' time for travel. This impacted the time they had available for instructional planning.

In general, the Head Start teachers we studied reported feeling overwhelmed by Head Start requirements and wondered why they appeared to have so much more regulation than other teachers. They protested that the amount of paperwork was excessive and took away from the time they had to accomplish other important teaching tasks including instructional planning. Valarie told us:

You know, being in the Head Start program, there is so much more paperwork on every little situation. For instances, an incident report... Yesterday I had a timeout that caused

an incident. So I had to do a timeout report on the child that bit the child and an incident report to the mom of the child that got bit. You're making the phone call to both moms and the supervisor, and faxing it all... All those papers and all I would have to do as a [public school]teacher is write a little note, 'So and so got bit on the arm today and we didn't see any swelling.' There's not a phone call or a fax to everyone.

The Head Start teachers we studied struggled to address the needs of the low-income families and children with whom they worked while they themselves struggled economically. Several of the Head Start teachers we studied reported taking extra jobs in the summer or during the year to meet family expenses and this impacted the time they could devote to planning their teaching. Pam and her husband struggled to send their daughter to college while he was unemployed. She often spoke about her money worries and reported that they had begun raising chickens for a poultry company in the area for extra money. For weeks after the chicks were delivered to them, Pam hurried home after work to help her husband feed and care for them. Later in our study, her husband went to work at the poultry processing plant, performing what she called "live hangings." She reported that he was ashamed to be working there and she felt bad for him, as it was "an awful job." They take them out of the cage and hang them and then they go through something slits their neck and it drips." But Pam went on to say, "It's good pay. Not a fun job, but it is one of the better paying jobs there."

The Head Start program overall struggled to address children and family needs given limited community resources. In the rural Appalachian communities where the teachers lived and worked, poverty was both longstanding and widespread. Under these circumstances, community organizations that might have been able to assist in supporting the children and families Head Start served were drained of resources that might have been accumulated in better times. All of the classrooms had limited classroom libraries and there were no public libraries in the communities. Instead, the Head Start teachers we studied had to be sure to meet the bookmobile when it came to town twice a month if they wanted a new supply of classroom books without spending their own money. Most of the classrooms had limited art supplies and all of the teachers used their own resources to supplement what was available. In several instances the teachers we studied taught in buildings that were old with limited space for outside play. The Head Start program struggled to find better facilities in the community but they were not readily available in the small isolated communities where the teachers taught. Under these circumstances, keeping the building clean and safe for the children was a high priority for the teachers and often interfered with their ability to plan for their teaching.

Like the rest of the country, the rural communities in which the teachers lived and worked were undergoing demographic changes that influenced how the teachers made instructional decisions. During our study, several Hispanic families moved into the area and enrolled their children in the Head Start program. None of the children spoke English and the teachers struggled to communicate with them and their families. The Head Start teachers asked for advice from their public school counterparts who were also struggling to address the needs of these newcomers to the community. Ultimately, Fanny and Miranda found resources on the internet to help them teach some English to the Spanish-speaking children in their classroom and they shared these resources with the other Head Start teachers. They offered to provide what they had learned tips to the public school teachers in the community. But, before any decision about getting together to share ideas was made, the children and families abruptly disappeared from the program. Miranda told us, "The poultry plant was raided. Many of the workers used fake IDs to

get jobs there.” Fanny went on to tell us, “It was brutal. All of the workers were locked in a room and they just dragged off husbands and fathers.” The two women were appalled and took up a collection for family members who remained behind. “We got together diapers, formula, food and blankets. With the dad gone, some of the families have nothing now.”

The Head Start teachers we studied were dismayed about the changes they saw taking place in society. They worried about how young children were impacted when mothers had to work outside of the home. They noted that Head Start children’s families seemed increasingly unstable. They noted an increase in violence on television and in toys and they worried about the effects on children’s development. They thought that the children entering their classrooms were less developmentally ready for preschool than in previous years, asserted that children currently in their classrooms exhibited far more behavioral challenges than in the past. Our observations confirmed that a large portion of the day in all of the classrooms was managing children’s challenging behaviors, influencing the amount and type of instruction the teachers were able to accomplish.

LESSONS LEARNED

Our six-year study of eleven Head Start teachers illuminated the complex influences that contribute to the daily teacher decision-making that ultimately becomes the Head Start program as it is delivered to children. Understanding how the Head Start teachers thought about and planned their daily instruction in our study was informed by previous research on teachers’ knowledge (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Vacca et. al., 2003). The Head Start teachers in our study held strong beliefs about children’s development and the role of Head Start. These beliefs were derived from their personal experiences and years of practical knowledge gained in the classroom. The Head Start teachers we studied differed greatly from us and the policy makers who insist that Head Start teachers acquire additional credentials in the value they placed on academic learning. The teachers devalued academic achievement in their own lives and in fact, several were willing to give up their jobs as Head Start teachers rather than submit themselves to schooling experiences that they did not see as useful. They believed that they had learned to do their work through personal and practical experiences in collaboration with others in their community who shared their goals for the children entrusted to them. Importantly, these goals related to helping children become members of the community. Under these circumstances, multiple opportunities for children to feel cared for, valued and to learn to socialize with one another were provided.

Perhaps mirroring their disregard for their own academic achievement, the teachers we studied did not appear to value it for the children’s sake. Helping children acquire academic readiness was not a high priority to the teachers we studied and little opportunity for the children to gain the academic readiness skills critical to success in formal schooling was made available. The lack of value ascribed to intentional teaching of academic readiness skills is of grave concern as without this emphasis, it is unclear how the achievement of children from low-income families will be improved, or how the gap between them and their middle-class peers can be reduced (Neuman, 2008). It is critical to increase teachers understanding of key academic readiness skills and help teachers see how this instruction can be infused within other activities they view as important, including those that support children’s social competence. The teachers’ lack of knowledge about typical/ atypical child development is also very problematic as they

appeared to be unaware of the importance of intervening early when children showed signs of developmental delay.

Deeply embedded in the sociocultural context that surrounded them and the children they taught, the Head Start teachers we studied accessed community funds of knowledge to plan daily activities for the children, validating the theoretical framework described by Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2005) who detail the importance of connecting curriculum to children's lives and the expertise inherent in communities. As members of the community in which they and the children lived, the Head Start teachers had ready access to the funds of knowledge within it and it was noteworthy that they freely made use of these rich sources for curriculum. On more than one occasion, we found ourselves reflecting on the fact that despite our abundance of professional knowledge, we would inevitably have struggled teaching in this context due to our relatively scant base of community knowledge as compared to these teachers. These teachers were well able to connect with families of the children they taught and it is important that they encouraged them to take an active role in their children's learning. They did so under circumstances that were far from ideal as teachers struggled to overcome the pervasive effects of poverty on their own lives, on the lives of the children they taught and throughout their community. For these reasons, we think it is important that Head Start programs continue to prioritize hiring teachers who have been Head Start parents and are members of the community from which the children come.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the common history and community connections afforded the Head Start teachers we studied did not always act to enrich their teaching. In several instances, past histories between individuals interfered with collaborations that would have benefitted children's learning, most notably between the school system and the Head Start program. We suspect that social class played an important role in explaining how these relationships unfolded and accounts in part for why Head Start teachers felt denigrated by their public school counterparts at times. Given the need for Head Start and public school collaborations on behalf of the learning of low income children, the need to deepen our understanding of these relationships is apparent.

We have acquired an appreciation of the enormity of the tasks taken on by the Head Start teachers we studied as they attempted to address the learning needs of the low income children they teach. Head Start's focus on the comprehensive needs of children in poverty meant that teachers attended to brushing teeth, eating nutritious meals and helping children stay healthy and safe. We are also impressed with the influence of organizational climate on teachers' instructional decision making. We think it is important to note that both the teachers and the local Head Start administrators often did not understand the rationale for regulations they viewed as having little to do with the circumstances in which they worked. Clearly, program administrators play an important role in bringing about change and they also to have a clear understanding of the reasons for it so they can provide teachers with support. The teachers we studied attempted to comply with the requirements as they were described even when they did not understand the rationale for them fully.

Future Directions

Translating the findings of our study into recommendations for future directions for research or practice is problematic as we realize that the Head Start teachers in our study live in an isolated

Appalachian community with a strong community presence that may not be evident in Head Start programs across the nation. For this reason, generalizing to other programs must be approached with caution. Nevertheless, our ethnography provides interesting data about the influences on instructional decision making on Head Start teachers that may help inform future research as well as discussion about policy and practice in Head Start.

The most important lesson we have learned from the Head Start teachers we studied is the critical importance of partnership between those who seek to bring about change and those who are asked to enact it. Examining what influenced the Head Start teachers we studied in making daily decisions about their instruction was a multi-faceted task and far more complex than we originally anticipated. Partnerships that bring about change will require considerable investments of time, resources and continuing support. We note that the rationale for various policies were often as unclear to us as they were to the Head Start program administrators and must be made clear. Further, in the push to address longstanding inequities in schooling for low income children, it is critical to acknowledge that those who are closest to the lives of the children whose schooling we hope to make more equitable have an important perspective to share.

Our study emphasizes the importance of providing ample support for Head Start teachers attempting to acquire additional schooling for credentialing especially considering the context and nature of the work they do. It is especially important to help teachers appreciate the value of academic learning if they are to support it in children. Requiring Head Start teachers to complete additional coursework to achieve credentialing will probably fail to influence outcomes for children if the teachers do not value what they are learning. It is also clear that helping them understand the importance of intentional instruction related to academic readiness will not be a simple task. Given the value placed on personal and practical knowledge by teachers, it appears unlikely that professional development as traditionally conceptualized will be particularly effective unless accompanied by ample opportunities to practice strategies perhaps with their own children and grandchildren.

The Head Start teachers we studied were very well able to access the funds of knowledge within their communities because they **were** community members. The fact that they did not appear to value academic achievement either for themselves or the children they taught may in fact reflect the values of the community to which they belong and this fact presents a dilemma for those who wish to bring about change in Head Start's curriculum. While it is a worthy goal to provide Head Start children with more academic readiness instruction and Head Start teachers with more academic credentials for their work, it is also important to maintain Head Start's emphasis on hiring teachers well-acquainted with the community in which they teach. Achieving a solution to this dilemma will likely require flexibility and finesse from Head Start both on a national and local level.

Lastly, if we are to be successful in asking teachers to accommodate change in how they plan instruction in their classrooms, it is essential that we help them figure out how they can undertake change under difficult circumstances. They must be helped to achieve short term objectives along the way so they can see progress along the way and take ownership of it. Acknowledging the complexity of the change process is probably also essential and change must be viewed as achievable as well as desirable. We think Sherry expressed it best when she talked to us about her goals for the children in her class:

It's kind of hard sometimes. When you say a goal you want. Well, everyone wants to be

a millionaire. It's not going to happen. You know what I mean? It has to be something written down that you can accomplish in a year.

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