

# The Effects of Health Locus of Control and Health Behavior on Teacher Stress and Life Satisfaction in Head Start Educators

## A Research Brief

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher well-being plays a crucial role in creating effective learning environments for young children. The present study examined the relationship between health locus of control (HLOC), health behaviors, teacher stress, and life satisfaction among Head Start (HS) teachers. Results suggest that teachers with a high Internal HLOC report lower overall stress levels and greater satisfaction compared to those with a low Internal HLOC. In addition, having a high Internal HLOC was also associated with greater overall life satisfaction. We also investigated how health behaviors (e.g., a commitment to healthy eating, exercise) affected stress and life satisfaction. We found that a “health conscious orientation” was related to lower stress levels and higher life satisfaction. Understanding the dynamics of locus of control, stress, life satisfaction, and teacher health behaviors provides valuable insights for developing comprehensive interventions that benefit the teachers and the children they serve.

## KEYWORDS

Teacher stress, Life Satisfaction, Locus of Control, Head Start

The field of early childhood education has become increasingly aware that teacher health and well-being are vital to the academic development of young children (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020; Jeon, et al., 2019; Whitaker, et al., 2015). Head Start (HS) is a specialized educational setting with the mission of supporting the academic, social, nutritional, and psychological development of vulnerable, economically disadvantaged preschool-aged children (Office of Head Start, 2020). In 2015, the federal HS released an updated policy and performance standard document that specifically required local programs to provide health and wellness information to staff as well as provide routine health education opportunities to include wellness and mental health (U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services 2015, 64). Due to the emphasis on health and wellness of HS staff, we wished to investigate how specific health-related concepts were related to teacher stress and life satisfaction.

### Health Locus of Control

Julian B. Rotter's (1954) social learning theory introduced Locus of Control (LOC), which refers to an individual's beliefs about whether their experiences are primarily shaped by their own actions (Internal LOC) or external factors such as luck or others' actions (External LOC). Health Locus of Control (HLOC), an extension of this theory, specifically addresses beliefs about control over health outcomes. Individuals with an Internal HLOC tend to engage in healthier behaviors, report better physical and mental well-being, and rely less on medical care (Wallston et al., 1994; Kesavayuth et al., 2020). Conversely, those with an External HLOC may attribute health outcomes to external factors, such as chance or healthcare providers, and are less likely to engage in positive health behaviors (Dogonchi et al., 2022). While psychological factors like HLOC significantly influence health behaviors, there is limited research on how these dynamics apply to early childhood education teachers.

Head Start programs primarily focus on the needs of children, leaving a significant gap in understanding the experiences of their teachers. Early childhood educators often face stressful work environments, inadequate support, and low wages which contributes to poor mental and physical health outcomes (Blancher et al., 2022; Whitaker et al., 2013). Research highlights that teacher well-being significantly impacts children's development and emphasizes the importance of supporting teachers' health to improve outcomes for the children they serve (Glazzard & Rose, 2020). The present study examines HLOC and health conscious behaviors in preschool teachers by exploring the connections to stress and life satisfaction. By understanding these relationships, this research aims to inform targeted interventions that enhance teacher well-being thereby improving classroom environments and educational outcomes.

### Current Study

### Participants and Procedure

Researchers at a health sciences center in the southern U.S. collaborated with a HS Mental Health Services Department to distribute surveys investigating HLOC, health orientation, teacher stress and life satisfaction. Surveys were distributed to 181 HS teachers with a total of 128 completed surveys returned (70.72% response rate). The sample was predominantly female (98.4%) and Black (93.8%), with an average age of 46 years (range 19–76). Most participants had significant teaching experience, with 46.9% reporting over 10 years in the role. Data collection was voluntary, anonymous, and free from incentives to prevent undue influence.

### Survey

The study survey was constructed using The Multidimensional Health Locus of Control (MHLC; Wallston et al., 1978), The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), Part I of the Pullis Stress Inventory (1992), and three questions regarding health conscious behavior. The final survey also included basic demographic variables (e.g., age, race, gender, marital status, position, and years of teaching). The MHLOC is designed to measure individuals' beliefs about control over health outcomes across three dimensions: Internal, External-Chance, and External-Powerful Others. The scale includes 18 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) with higher scores indicating stronger beliefs in each dimension. Internal LOC reflects control through personal actions, External-Chance LOC attributes outcomes to fate or chance, and External-Powerful Others LOC emphasizes the influence of external figures like healthcare providers. The MHLC has demonstrated strong reliability and validity across diverse populations and settings (Moshki et al., 2007; Wallston et al., 1994). The SWLS is designed to measure overall life satisfaction through five statements assessing an individual's subjective evaluations of their life circumstances. Respondents rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) where higher scores indicate greater satisfaction. The SWLS demonstrates strong validity and

reliability, with scores positively associated with psychological well-being and happiness and negatively associated with depression and anxiety (Pavot & Diener, 2009). The Pullis Stress Inventory was used to assess teacher stress. The instrument allows for measuring various sources of teacher stress including school/setting, career, workload, and student characteristics. Respondents rated their stress levels on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all anxious) to 3 (extremely anxious) with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress. Finally, the health conscious portion of the survey included the following questions: 1) I feel very healthy, both physically and mentally; 2) I consistently prioritize healthy eating and consume fruits and vegetables in almost all of my meals; 3) I exercise consistently, almost daily or multiple times a week. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "uncertain" to "strongly agree." These questions were utilized to analyze whether a health orientation was related to teacher stress and life satisfaction.

### Key Findings

In regard to teacher stress, teachers with a high Internal HLOC reported significantly lower total stress compared to those with low Internal HLOC. High Internal HLOC also was associated with significantly lower career/school stress than low Internal HLOC. Teachers with high External-Chance HLOC reported significantly higher total stress compared to those with low External-Chance HLOC. High External-Chance HLOC was also linked to higher student stress compared to low External-Chance HLOC. External-Power HLOC did not significantly affect total stress.

Regarding life satisfaction, teachers with high Internal HLOC reported significantly higher life satisfaction compared to those with low Internal HLOC. External-Chance HLOC and External-Power HLOC were not significantly associated with life satisfaction.

A "Health Conscious Orientation" variable was created based on responses to health-related behaviors (e.g., feeling healthy, eating right, exercising). According to the results, 56.3% of teachers were

categorized as high in Health Conscious Orientation, while 38.6% were categorized as low. Teachers with high Health Conscious Orientation reported significantly lower stress levels compared to those with low Health Conscious Orientation. Furthermore, those with high health conscious orientation had significantly higher life satisfaction compared to those with low Health Conscious Orientation.

In conclusion, teachers with high Internal HLOC and a strong Health Conscious Orientation experience lower stress and greater life satisfaction, suggesting that fostering a sense of personal control over health and promoting health-conscious behaviors may improve well-being and reduce occupational stress among educators. Conversely, reliance on external factors (chance or powerful others) for health outcomes is associated with increased stress, particularly related to student challenges. These findings highlight the importance of addressing HLOC and health-related behavior in interventions aimed at improving teacher well-being.

*Fostering a sense of personal control over health and promoting health-conscious behaviors may improve well-being and reduce occupational stress among*

### Summary and Implications

The results of this study provide preliminary evidence that HLOC is associated with lower stress and greater life satisfaction. Therefore, implementing health programs and initiatives to promote HLOC among HS teachers is essential. Encouraging health awareness and the adoption of positive health behaviors, such as healthy eating, regular exercise, and stress management, may further enhance teachers' well-being and resilience. Administrators in HS must recognize the importance of health conscious behavior and HLOC on teacher well-being which can inform targeted support and educational training opportunities. Furthermore, investing in health promotion programs, such as those shown effective in studies like Yetman et al. (2020), can encourage a "culture of wellness" in

schools. Professional development opportunities, focusing on stress management and resilience, can enhance teachers' sense of internal control and empowerment, reducing stress and increasing life satisfaction. For HS teachers, engaging in health-conscious behaviors, including mindfulness, balanced diets, and regular exercise, may improve teachers' ability to take control of their well-being. By taking control of their wellbeing, teachers may be able to build self-efficacy and to better manage job-related stressors.

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