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Abstract

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Keywords

Head Start, Poverty, Teacher-Child Relationship, Self-Efficacy, Stress, Grounded Theory

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Exploring Teacher Factors that Influence Teacher-Child Relationships in Head Start: A Grounded Theory

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The purpose of this paper was to explore factors that influence teacher-child relationships in Head Start. Three Head Start teachers from three centers were recruited for this study. Interview and observation data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach by using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Two coders completed the coding process. Inter-coder reliability and other triangulation techniques were employed to ensure the credibility of this study. The analysis revealed factors that teachers perceived as beneficial or harmful to their relationships with children. Three main themes emerged: professionalism (i.e., teacher beliefs, education, and work experience), teacher self-efficacy (i.e., teacher empowerment, children's progress, and sufficient education and work experience), and job stress (i.e., lacking organizational support, teacher-parent conflict, workload, and insufficient training). The data vividly illustrated the mechanisms through which those influential factors might work. The results may have implications for teacher education and fostering positive teacher-child relationships in Head Start. Keywords: Head Start, Poverty, Teacher-Child Relationship, Self-Efficacy, Stress, Grounded Theory

The transition from home to preschool marks significant changes in children's early life (Zinsser, Bailey, Curby, Denham, & Bassett, 2013). During the preschool period, teachers play a critical role in helping children navigate through this new experience (Garner, Mahatmya, Moses, & Bolt, 2014). Additionally, given the growing number of working mothers and single-parent households (Snyder & Dillow, 2012), more and more young children are spending longer periods of time with early childhood caregivers or teachers (Zinsser et al., 2013). As a result, these teachers play an increasingly important role in various aspects of young children's school readiness (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). Children's relationships with teachers constitute a major part of their early school experiences, and the quality of teacher-child relationships can be characterized by closeness (supportiveness, warmth) and conflict (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). The quality of teacher-child relationships is linked to children's social-emotional development (O'Connor, Dearing, Collins, 2011), peer reputation (Garner et al., 2014), academic achievement (McCormick, O'Connor, Cappella, & McClowry, 2013), and school adjustment (Silva et al., 2011). Furthermore, the quality of early teacher-child relationship seems to have a greater impact on children from impoverished backgrounds, as compared to their more affluent peers (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010).

Despite the growing amount of research on teacher-child relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 1999; Garner et al., 2014), empirical attention to teacher-child relationships at the preschool level is lacking. There is a particular gap in research on preschool teachers who serve children from very low SES backgrounds, such as those enrolled in Head Start. Moreover, we noticed the absence of naturalistic research about this subject. The majority of studies about teacher-child relationships are quantitative, little is known regarding preschool teachers' perceptions of the mechanism through which the influential factors may affect teacher-child relationships. The purpose of this study therefore was to explore the roles of influential factors among teacher-child relationships from teachers' perspectives and to pave the way for further investigations. Considering that research studies in this field are heavily quantitative, we

examined teacher-child relationships through a qualitative lens. The following section provides a brief review of the extant empirical literature about teacher factors (i.e., education, stress, and self-efficacy) and social-ecological factors (i.e., parental and organizational support) that influence the quality of teacher-child relationships.

Teacher Factors

Teacher-child relationship is a complex concept; a number of studies have revealed factors that are related to the quality of teacher-child relationships (e.g., Li-Grining et al., 2010). These factors can be classified into three dimensions: attributes of teachers (Pianta & Hamre, 2009), attributes of children (O'Connor et al., 2011), and social-ecological factors (Hamre et al., 2012). The present research examined teacher and social-ecology factors; however, all three areas are briefly reviewed in the following section.

Attributes of teachers. The quality of teacher-child relationships is associated with teachers' attributes such as education level, teacher-perceived stress, and self-efficacy (Ho, Guven, & Bagnato, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). A number of research studies have provided evidence that high teacher education levels, lower levels of teacher-perceived stress, and higher teacher self-efficacy are related to more harmonious teacher-child relationships (e.g., Choi & Dobbs-Oates, 2016; Zinsser et al., 2013).

Teacher education is an important predictor of the quality of preschool teacher-child relationships (Howes, James, & Ritchie, 2003). Howes and colleagues' claim is echoed by a meta-analytic study examining the relation between teachers' education levels and teacher rated teacher-child relationships and child outcomes. The authors report a statistically significant correlation between teacher education and teacher-child relationship quality with a moderate effect size (Kelley & Camilli, 2007). However, other researchers argue that child-development-related education and in-service training are better than teacher education in predicting teacher-child relationships (Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2005).

To increase their understanding of teacher-child relationships, researchers also have considered the role of teachers' work-related stress. Goelman and Guo (1998) reveal eight early childhood educator stressors: wages, working conditions, conflicting job descriptions, the lack of organizational support, education backgrounds, employment histories, personality factors, and perceptions of childcare work. Previous research suggests a negative correlation between preschool teachers' stress levels and teacher-child conflict (Gastaldi, Pasta, Longobardi, Prino, & Quaglia, 2014). In line with this finding, Pianta and Hamre (2009) report that a high level of work-related stress in teachers often leads to hostility and anger towards children, especially when encountering children with behavior problems. Moreover, preschool teachers who work with children from lower-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are likely to experience a high stress level due to inadequate professional trainings, student behavior problems, and limited school resources (Hamre et al., 2012; Yoshikawa & Knitzer, 1997).

Another factor that influences preschool teacher-child relationships is teacher self-efficacy (Chung, Marvin, & Churchill, 2005). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) define teacher self-efficacy as teachers' belief in their own abilities to influence the environment and students' outcomes. Theoretically, teacher's self-efficacy in cultivating relationships with children can be influenced by their relevant past experiences of interacting with children (Bandura, 1997). However, very limited research has explored the relation between teacher self-efficacy and teacher-rated teacher-child relationships, especially in preschools (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010). Chung et al. (2005) indicate that preschool teachers who score higher on self-efficacy scales tend to have a closer relationship with children (Chung et al., 2005). At the primary school level, Gastaldi et al. report a moderate negative correlation between teacher self-efficacy and teacher-rated conflict with children in first to third grade; however, the same

relation does not apply to the closeness scale (Gastaldi et al., 2014). Previous research also suggested that children's academic gains can be associated with teacher self-efficacy. For example, Guo et al. (2010) find a strong correlation between preschool children's vocabulary gains and teacher self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy is closely related to teacher empowerment (Amoli & Youran, 2014). In schools where principals engage their employees in teacher empowerment activities (e.g., giving teachers more decision-making authorities, providing teachers professional growth opportunities, and improving teachers' work environment), teachers are more likely to report high self-efficacy (Davis & Wilson, 2000). Other possible sources of teacher self-efficacy include teacher education, certification, and experience (Mashburn, Hamre, Downer, & Pianta, 2006).

Social-ecological factors. Social-ecological factors are embedded in the school environment and the society; they may directly or indirectly affect teacher-child relationships (Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Yoshikawa & Knizer, 1997). Examples of social-ecological factors include relationships with parents and organizational support (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). Adopting an ecological perspective, teacher-parent relationships and teacher-child relationships are two codependent systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Warm teacher-parent relationships are associated with closer bonds between teachers and children (Wyrick & Rudasill, 2009). However, it is unknown whether positive teacher-child relationships may be a cause or a result of positive teacher-parent relationships (Chung et al., 2005).

Very limited empirical evidence suggests a direct relation between organizational support and teacher child relationships, but ample research does indicate that this association may be mediated by teacher stress. Cancio and colleagues claim that there is a link between organizational support perceived by teachers and their stress levels (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013) and teachers who have more stress tend to score high on a teacher-student conflict scale (Hamre et al., 2012). Moreover, in validating their scale measuring early-childhood teacher experience, Fantuzzo and colleagues report correlations among organizational support and both teachers' interaction quality with children and teacher-parent interaction, suggesting two pathways by which organizational support may impact teacher-child relationships (Fantuzzo et al., 2012).

Teacher-Child Relationships among Children from Lower-SES Backgrounds

Preschool teacher-child relationships among teachers serving children from lower-SES groups demand specific attention. Research has consistently demonstrated the negative impacts of poverty on different aspects of child development. For example, children from lower-SES families are more likely to achieve poorer social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes than their more fortunate peers (Mercer & DeRosier, 2008). Furthermore, the effects of poverty appear to be magnified for children who also experience insecure relationships at home (Copeland, Denham, & DeMulder, 1997).

One setting in which teachers serve this vulnerable child population is Head Start. Head Start is one of the longest-running educational programs that address school readiness among three- to five- year-old children living in poverty (Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015). The primary feature of Head Start is that it predominantly serves families with annual incomes below the federal poverty line (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Research has revealed that the negative impacts of poverty can be accentuated if poverty is experienced during early childhood (Copeland et al., 1997). The mission of Head Start is to help alleviate these risks and place children on a more favorable long-term trajectory by providing health, education, social service, and parent outreach program for children and their families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

Head Start centers are comparable to other preschools but with a more systematic administration structure. Head Start teachers' daily routines are very similar to that of other preschool teachers. Their responsibilities include teaching, nurturing, and providing safe and caring environments. However, due to some distinct characteristics of Head Start, its teachers may be more prone to job stress and burnout than childcare workers in other comparable organizations, which may eventually worsen negative teacher-child relationships (Aikens et al., 2010). For example, working with many at-risk children, who make up the majority of the Head Start student population, contributes substantially to teachers' workload stress and may ultimately escalate teacher-child conflict (Whitaker et al., 2015). Moreover, Head Start has a hierarchical supervisory system. The Training and Technical Assistant system (T/TA) is designed for monitoring Head Start centers' education and administration quality. The three tiers of supervisory system are national, state/regional, and grantee (local assistance) level, within which grantees work directly with Head Start centers. Each grantee usually has several mentor teachers, whose responsibilities are monitoring and directing Head Start teachers' work, as well as communicating between centers and the local office (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Supervisory visits are usually at least once every quarter, and include both scheduled and unannounced visits. Research has indicated a positive association between supervisory support and teacher self-efficacy (Amoli & Youran, 2014; however, feeling constrained and experiencing a lack of decision-making freedom (due to constant monitoring) might increase job-related stress (Davis & Wilson, 2000).

Given that this is a grounded theory project, the present research does not have specific research hypotheses. The grounded theory method does not require preconceived hypotheses, in order to ensure that the results are generated from continual comparative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, we expected the study to identify themes that are related to teachers' characteristics and their work environment based on the extant literature on this topic.

We aimed to explore possible influential factors of teacher-child relationships in Head Start. In accordance with our research goal, the lead author conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with Head Start teachers and non-participant observations of teachers' interactions with children. Social desirability during interviews and observations might be a potential source of bias. To mitigate these threats to credibility of the study, we utilized triangulation strategies such as multiple raters and cross referencing. This study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board. To protect participants' privacy, each consenting teacher participant was assigned a pseudonym; their consent forms were locked in a file cabinet in a research facility, and interview recordings were stored in a computer with password protection.

Method

This qualitative research took place in three Head Start centers in a southern state. Head Start is a government-funded program that serves children and families that are below the U.S. federal poverty line (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Most teachers in the Head Start programs are not certified, but they need to have an Associate's degree as a minimum requirement. By the end of 2013, half of the Head Start teachers were required to have a Bachelor's degree in an early childhood education-related field (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). We chose Head Start as the focal study setting considering its unique student population. Head Start almost exclusively serve children living in poverty, who were more likely to have a conflictual relationship with teachers as compared to their more affluent peers (Whitaker et al., 2015). Moreover, Head Start operates under a three-tier supervisory system (national, state, and local). The amount of organizational oversight and

support that Head Start teachers receive may add to or reduce teacher-perceived stress and subsequently impact the building of teacher-child relationships (Hamre et al., 2012).

Our decision to utilize a grounded theory method came from two considerations. The first one is that the rigorous three-stage data analysis procedure, which is discussed in detail in the data analysis section, allows us to systematically establish an explanatory framework. The second consideration is that there is not yet a theory about what influences teacher perceived relationships with children in Head Start; therefore, we attempt to derive such a theory that is completely grounded in data.

The grounded theory approach is an inductive qualitative research method; it aims to develop exploratory models that are grounded in the empirical data (Creswell, 2012). Grounded theory was first proposed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, and modified by many researchers such as Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Glaser and Strauss' original grounded theory is fully embedded in a constructivism stance. They suggested that researchers should minimize preconceptions to ensure that theories were entirely grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), "An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study" (p. 37). Subsequently, Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended to conduct literature review after data analysis. Instead, we adopted Strübing (2007) and Urquhart (2007)'s views on literature review in grounded theory research and conducted a literature review prior to data collection and analysis (primarily to inform the interview protocol). Strübing and Urquhart both suggested that prior empirical knowledge was important for designing and interpreting a grounded theory project; the key was to keep an open mind and allow new themes to emerge. Thus, our research is a modified grounded theory project.

Participants

Upon obtaining approval from IRB, the lead author contacted a local Head Start director and asked her permission to recruit teachers in her region. Three female African-American Head Start teachers were recruited for this study (see Table 1); each represented a distinct center under the organizational control of the same Head Start grantee. Among the three recruited classrooms, each classroom served 14 to 19 children, and each teacher was paired with one teaching assistant.

Table 1. *Participants' Information*

Name	Teaching Experience (yr.)	Education	Job Title
Wendy	2	Ph.D. (in progress)	site lead/teacher
Nina	27	B.A.	site lead/teacher
Eva	12	B.A. (in progress)	site lead/teacher

Each teacher had taught their classes for at least 2 months. According to research on early attachment, two months are sufficient for young children to form emotional bonds with caregivers (Waters & Waters, 2006). Participants' teaching experiences ranged from 2 to 27 years. Their education varied from Associate's degrees to a Ph.D. in process. All three participants were both site leads (i.e., completed director-like tasks) and classroom teachers.

Data Collection

The lead author conducted 30 minutes of semi-structured interviews with each participant. Six scripted questions were intended to uncover underlying teacher attributes and social-ecological factors and how they have influenced teacher-child relationships (i.e., teacher-perceived personal traits and environmental factors that may influence their relationship with children). The interview questions were based on previous research results and they were written in a thought-provoking but not leading fashion (see Table 2). Teachers were also encouraged to express their perspectives in their own terms. The interviews took place in teacher's offices or classrooms, and were audio recorded. After interviewing teachers, the lead author observed their interactions with children during the instruction or free play time. The observations were non-participatory, which meant that she took notes about targeted phenomena while ensuring minimal interruption in the natural teacher-child interactions. The observations were documented by field notes that served as a written record of the target phenomenon; the language was plain and descriptive to ensure objectivity. The focus of observations was primarily teacher-child interactions as well as teachers' daily activities. The purpose of observation was to triangulate with teachers' interviews and to provide additional conceptual understanding of teacher-child dynamics in their natural environment. Each observation was 30 to 60 minutes in length. Participants also received a gift card in gratitude for their agreeing to participate.

Table 2 *Interview Questions*

How do you assess your relationships with the children in your class? Can you give me some examples?
How do you value your relationship with the children?
How would you describe yourself (personality, temperament, performance under stress, education)?
Which of the characteristics you described just now stand in the way or helped you in the building of relationships with children?
What environmental factors (work stress, job satisfaction, relationship with parents etc.) or personal factors do you think stood in the way of building a good relationship with children?
What environmental factors (work stress, job satisfaction, relationship with parents etc.) or personal factors do you think helped build a good relationship with children?

Data Analysis

A grounded theory method was employed for data analysis. The data analysis team included the lead author as the primary coder and an undergraduate assistant as the secondary coder. Prior to data analysis, the secondary coder went through a three-week training process conducted by the primary coder. The training included the three-level coding procedure, use of NVivo software, and coding practice. The two coders officially began coding when the percentage of agreement reached 80% or greater.

Three levels of coding were engaged sequentially for data analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The secondary coder participated in transcribing, axial coding, and selective coding. Interview and observation data was transcribed and imported into NVivo for further examination. First, the primary coder used the "free nodes" feature in NVivo for open coding. During open coding, she read transcripts line by line, and categorized phenomena in the interview transcripts and field notes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After open coding, each coder obtained a copy of the NVivo project for axial coding. Second, both coders conducted axial coding independently by further grouping categories, making connections between categories, and finding contexts and conditions of certain phenomenon (Oktay, 2012). The "relationship nodes" function was utilized for axial coding; it allowed coders to mark relationships among related categories. For example, open codes such as "paperwork" and "teacher-parent conflict" were classified in a larger category – "stress." Third, both coders used the "tree nodes" feature in NVivo for selective coding, during which coders selected core themes based on the emerging theory, and systematically related them to other sub-categories (Creswell, 2012). Three main themes emerged through data analysis: teacher self-efficacy, professionalism, and job stress. Throughout the three levels of coding, the coders used the memos, word frequency, and coding strips functions of NVivo to help develop codes and themes.

Triangulation

Two potential sources of bias in the present research were participants' susceptibility to social desirability in shaping their responses during face-to-face interviews and observations, as well as researchers' interpretation of the results. To mitigate these probable biases, we utilized a series of triangulation techniques to ensure the reliability of the present study. Percentage of agreement was calculated after axial coding to assess inter-rater reliability. In this study, the two coders achieved a percentage of agreement of 81%, indicating moderately strong reliability. Member checking was conducted after interviews. The lead author recapitulated the main points to participants after interviews and asked the participants to confirm their accuracy (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Moreover, the lead author conducted several meetings with mentors after selective coding to discuss the emerging conceptual framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results

The present research revealed several teacher factors that might benefit or impede teacher-child relationships. We were also able to identify children's progress (due to teachers' efforts) and the reciprocity of experience and knowledge as two additional factors that teachers thought influential, but which has not been thoroughly studied in previous research. Qualitative data provided vivid examples of how these factors were perceived by the teachers to have affected teacher-child relationships in Head Start (Figure 1). We believe that data demonstrated a pattern consistent with an emerging, plausible theory, however we did not conclude that results, and the aligned theory, have reached theoretical saturation due to the relatively limited number of participants. Therefore, in this section we describe a provisional emerging theory. Grounded in the data collected from the three participants, the emerging theory indicated that the quality of teacher-child relationships in Head Start could benefit from teacher empowerment, prompt and efficient supervisory support, less workload stress, and education and hand-on training regarding working with young children, especially children from low-SES backgrounds. In the sections below, we present an overview of teacher's beliefs about teacher-child relationships, three positive factors (i.e., children's progress due to teachers'

effort, promotion, and the reciprocity of knowledge and experiences) and three negative factors (i.e., lacking organizational support, workload stress, and teacher-parent conflict).

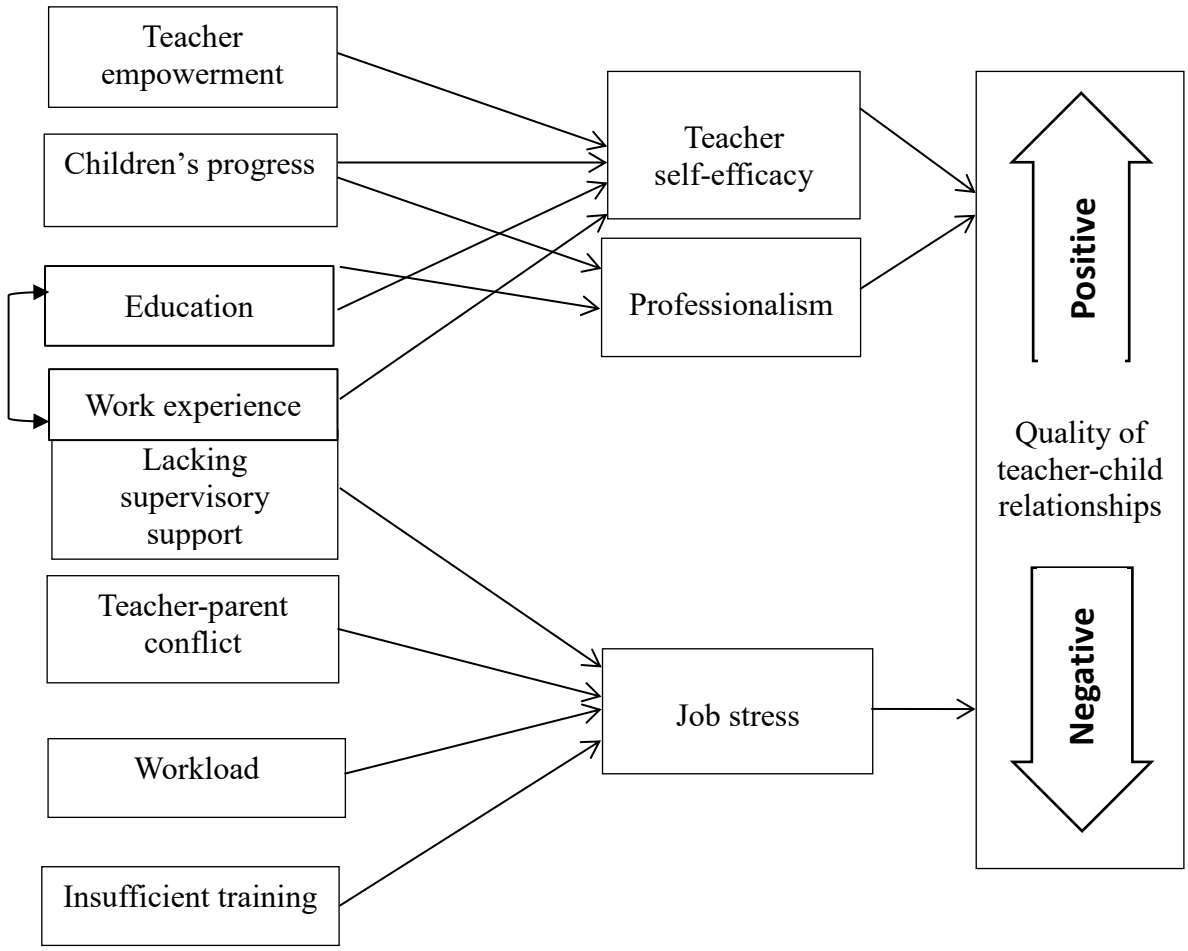

Figure 1. *Teacher factors that influence teacher-child relationships.* The figure presents three factors that may have influenced teacher perceived quality of teacher-child relationships. Each factor was associated with its sub-categories.

The General Picture – Teacher Beliefs

Our initial question was to ask teachers about their perceptions about teacher-child relationships. Teachers indicated their beliefs about positive teacher-child relationships. According to these teachers, a good teacher-child relationship was built on love, trust, and respect; it also needed to be fun. For example, Wendy (all teacher names are pseudonyms) commented, "If they don't trust you, they shut themselves out and shut you out." Nina suggested that respect also contributed to warm and healthy teacher-child relationships. She said, "Respect them even more than love; respect helps you love them…. What does the respect give the child? Security." Nina recognized that respecting children included acknowledging individual differences, their emotions, and their choices. Respect should also be mutual; when children respected the teacher's authority, they recognized the teacher as a secure figure. Nina also remarked on the fun aspect of relationships, "I want the children to see me laughing with them, doing silly things with them, and having fun with them. So when I correct them, they don't feel as harsh." The lead author observed that Nina's interactions with children mirrored

her belief in "fun relationships." The lead author observed Nina singing, joking, and exercising with children.

The participants all recognized nurturing a good relationship with children as their responsibility; in turn, a positive teacher-child relationship became rewarding to teachers. Eva expressed that teaching was not as effective without a good teacher-child relationship. As she mentioned, "[Without a good relationship] they are not willing to learn, it is like you are just there." Nina also viewed the importance of teacher-child relationships from a social-emotional perspective. She said, "Each child brought their problems into the classroom, and it is the teacher's responsibility to understand them and walk them through the problems." Their awareness of children's lower-SES backgrounds may have affected teacher's perspectives. For some of the children, according to Wendy, Head Start was "The only place that some children could have a decent nap and get snacks and food." Eva and Wendy both used the term "safe haven" to describe Head Start centers. Eva explained, "If this is not the place that a child can be safe and have someone to rely on then they don't feel safe anymore." Wendy admitted that she experienced frustration at work, but, as she expressed, "At the end of the day, it [helping children] tops everything…. Being a teacher is not for the income but for the outcome." Wendy found herself bonding with children when helping them overcome emotional struggles (e.g., parents' divorce). Wendy compared herself to the children's "pit stop," she remarked, "My children always see Miss Wendy before class if they have trouble, that's their way to get through the day."

"It Is Like Winning A Lottery" -- Children's Progress Due to Teachers' Efforts

When asked about examples of positive relationships they had with children, all participants provided examples of witnessing children progressing academically and emotionally due to their efforts. This indirect pathway is represented in Figure 1 by the arrows connecting children's progress to positive teacher-child relationships through teachers' self-efficacy. Nina used the word "excited" to describe her feeling when she heard children applying what they have learned. Nina recalled an incident: she helped a child who had tripped and fallen down up from the floor; the child told her, "I'm fine. I drank milk and I have strong bones." Nina recognized that the child was interpreting the knowledge about exercising and bones, which she had recently taught the class. Nina remarked, "To watch a child learn is fascinating."

Eva taught a child with cognitive impairments a year prior to her interview; she spent three months teaching the child to count to three. When the child finally achieved the goal, it reassured Eva of her career choice. She commented:

> Once you see the changes in children, the changes you affected in children's lives, and when they learned something, it is like winning a lottery.… I was like, this is what I was trained for; this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

Books vs. Classroom -- Knowledge and Experience

Along with teacher beliefs, teachers' education and experience are considered to represent their professionalism. As portrayed in Figure 1, both education and experience are connected with professionalism by arrows. Teachers also emphasized the reciprocity of education and experience, as the double headed arrow shows. As Nina said, "In early childhood, you have to work.… It is a great exchange when you return to school." All teachers acknowledged the importance of their education. They all agreed that early childhood related knowledge that they learned in school helped them in understanding and teaching children. The three teachers had at least an Associate's degree in an early childhood-related field. One of the

participants, Wendy, was in the process of pursuing a Ph.D. degree in an education leadership-related area. They all commented on the usefulness of their education in interacting with children. For instance, when asked if her previous education benefited her career, Eva said, "It is. I learned a lot more about how to help them learn and how to engage children." However, they recognized education as a "plus" in comparison to experience. Nina commented

> Knowledge and education always helps, it is always a plus. But in early childhood, you have to work. Just having the experience, you can bring a lot to the classroom. It is a great exchange when you return to school, you have all the experience you had in classroom and the knowledge you are receiving from the former education.

All participants had the experience of working then returning to school and they highly value the reciprocity of experience and knowledge.

These comments indicate the positive influence of education on practice perceived by the teachers. However, one teacher expressed her concern about inadequate teacher education and practicums regarding working with children and families from impoverished backgrounds.

Nina, who had the most extensive working experience among participants, commented on what she viewed as insufficient preservice teacher training on dealing with challenging social issues faced by children and families living in poverty. Nina suggested that some challenging social dynamics, especially those that were commonly seen in low-income households (e.g., parental divorce and children's problem behaviors), had become a forceful factor threatening teacher-child relationships. She said, "[In the future] Teacher education would have more social work/social science in the curriculum." Nina then expanded her comment:

> The changing social dynamics, such as divorced parents, teen parents, same sex marriages, began to challenge the teaching effectiveness. Teacher education did not put enough emphasis on the overarching social changes. If teachers were not given the skills and knowledge to deal with those issues those children brought to the classroom, how can teachers bond with children?

During Nina's career, she witnessed many novice Head Start teachers, including her daughter, being discouraged and frustrated by children's behavior and other issues possibly related to their family backgrounds. Nina said, "The new teachers went in the real world and thinking that they could make a difference, but came out of the classroom like a wet noodle."

"It Is A Different Ball Game" – Job Title Change

Wendy discussed the positive aspects after being recently promoted from a classroom teacher to a site lead when asked about the social-ecological factors that influenced her relationship with children:

> When you are a teacher, you don't have time to see what's going on outside of the classroom. But when I became the director [site lead], I started to see more…. I was able to make big differences in such short time period.… I love to be the voice for my children, my parents, and my teachers. I love it.

Wendy thought her promotion drove relationships with children and families in a more positive direction because she was able to advocate for children and parents more effectively as well as

make immediate changes for her center. She used "a different ball game" to describe her promotion experience. As illustrated in Figure 1, job title change is represented by teacher empowerment and is connected to teacher self-efficacy and positive teacher-child relationships.

"We Are Wearing Too Many Hats" – Workload

Despite the feelings of empowerment, teachers' workload emerged as a factor that teachers thought may worsen their relationships with children. The three participants were typically with children eight or nine hours a day. Beyond classroom responsibilities, as site leads, they were also in charge of processing the paperwork and overseeing the whole center (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Although Wendy elaborated on the increasing autonomy she experienced after being promoted as a site lead, Nina expressed the stress due to her job responsibilities as a site lead and a teacher. She suggested, "When a teacher spent a long day hearing children talking and screaming in high-pitch voices, it is noise pollution. Especially when your assistants and volunteers are not there." Moreover, children had their own family backgrounds and problems they brought into the classrooms; teachers sometimes needed to step into family issues in order to help them. Nina said, "Teachers wear too many hats.… We are social workers, mediators, nurses, and teachers." Eva explained the mechanism through which teachers' workload may contribute to teacher-child conflict, as she explained, "Job stress wore teachers' patience thin. When you have a lot on your mind, you tend to be harsh when a child is acting out." Eva's comment is illustrated in Figure 1, where teachers' workload is connected with job stress and pointed toward negative teacher-child relationships. Observation of teacher-child interactions reflected teachers' concern about workload stress. For instance, Nina's morning circle activity was disrupted several times by two fighting children. She had to pause the activity to redirect them. As another example, Eva's interactions with children during the center time were interrupted by having to answer questions another teacher had about paperwork.

Lack of Organizational Support

Building on her comments about teachers' workload stress contributing to teacher-child conflict, Wendy suggested that insufficient organizational support from mentor teachers and the director was another stressor. As Wendy mentioned, "Supervisors make decisions based on what they are thinking not what they see." She constantly struggled between following her supervisors' instructions and implementing what she thought was better for the center. This process was very "frustrating," according to Wendy. It seemed that miscommunications and insufficient supports from supervisors added to teacher-perceived stress (see Figure 1).

Teacher-Parent Conflict

Teacher-parent conflict appeared to be a salient stressor across all interviews. As shown in Figure 1, the arrow connects teacher-parent relationships to teachers' job stress, which then leads to negative teacher-child relationships. Teachers' comments implied their concerns about parents' irresponsibility, uncooperative attitude, and teacher-parent conflict. Nina remarked, "Some parents have the mentality that teachers have the full responsibility of educating their children. I'm not talking about alphabet, I'm talking about eating with a fork, taking care of your toilet needs, and the difference between an elephant and a giraffe!" Participants recognized teacher-parent conflict as an important factor that hindered teacher-child relationships. Wendy admitted, "Even though teachers and parents tried not to show the

conflicts in front of children, children could still sense it. Then school became less secure to them." In a worse scenario, parents spoke ill about the teacher to the child, and it directly impaired the teacher-child relationship. Wendy provided an example:

> So the week before last week we had a lockdown situation, we had a custody issue. One of the children was abducted from her mom. She had a step brother that is in our center; her mom and his dad lived together but not married.… Because the parents were upset, they might have said negative things about Miss Wendy, and that could have affected children's perception about me.

Eva witnessed some cases where parents did not like the teacher; she said, "Even though the teacher did not really take any anger out on the child, but she still had some ill feelings towards the child." Eva and Nina's comments suggested ways through which teacher-parent conflict could influence teacher-child relationships. Eva also admitted that she has been involved in conflict with some parents, but she still tried to foster good relationships with the parents. Eva explained, "Because I want the parents to feel safe, to let them know that I'm not going to do something to their children, I'm here to help you and your child." All participants agreed that teachers needed to learn when to flick the emotional "switch" to cope with negative feelings.

Teachers all recognized the importance of fostering relationships with parents, and they placed a lot of effort into it. For example, they implemented parent's day, classroom journals, and communication notes. Despite all the efforts toward building relationships with parents, all three teachers found it very frustrating to work with parents who were not cooperative. Nina expressed, "Knowing children's family backgrounds helped teachers understand and relate to children." But when parental support was absent, bonding with children became more difficult.

Discussion

This research sought to explore teacher factors that influence teacher-child relationships in Head Start. This study revealed that teachers' experience of empowerment, witnessing children's progress, and the reciprocity of education and work experience seemed to have positively influenced their relationships with children. These factors were categorized as aspects of teacher self-efficacy. In contrast, workload, teacher-parent conflict, the lacking organizational support, and insufficient education and experience were reported by teachers as negative influences on teacher-child relationships. These factors were classified as job stress in the present study (see Figure 1).

Teachers' Professionalism

All participants discussed their professionalism regarding the importance of teacher-child relationships. Figure 1 depicts the two elements that teachers thought constituted their professionalism, education and experience. They believed that a positive teacher-child relationship should be based on love, trust, fun, and respect. Teachers' comments conveyed the importance of positive teacher-child relationships; they affected children academically and emotionally, and gave them a sense of security, especially for those who had insecure relationships with their primary caregivers. Two participants compared their centers to a "safe haven" for children who were not emotionally and physically secure at home. Teachers' perceptions converged with previous studies' findings. For instance, O'Connor and colleagues (2011) revealed a positive association between preschool teacher-child closeness and children's social emotional development. Moreover, McCormick and colleagues report a positive association between teacher-rated teacher-child relationships and children's math and

reading scores (McCormick et al., 2013). These positive impacts also are amplified for at-risk children, such as those attending Head Start programs (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010).

Chung et al. (2005) report that teachers with a higher level of education were more likely to have positive relationships with children. In line with the previous research, all participating teachers acknowledged that their past education helped them understand children. However, they seemed to value the reciprocity of knowledge and experience more than either of those two factors standing alone. They agreed that education helped them appreciate children, but emphasized that practice enabled them to place the knowledge into use.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy is defined as teachers' perceived ability to influence students' outcomes and the environment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Teacher self-efficacy is associated with teacher child relationships, especially with conflict (Chung et al., 2005; Guo et al., 2010). In the present study, we discerned three factors that might be associated with teacher self-efficacy and possibly contributed to positive teacher-child relationships. As illustrated in Figure 1, teacher empowerment, children's progress, and the reciprocity of education and work experience are connected to teacher self-efficacy.

Amoli and Youran (2014) suggest that teachers are more likely to report higher self-efficacy if their organizations grant them more decision-making freedom, more professional growth opportunities, improved work conditions, and other empowerment activities (Davis & Wilson, 2000). Consequently, teachers who perceive more control tend to report a higher level of closeness with children (Whitaker et al., 2015). In the present study, Wendy believed that her promotion benefited her relationships with children and families, because she could make immediate changes for her center and better advocate for children and families.

According to Bandura, a mastery experience is one of the most powerful sources of teacher self-efficacy (1997). In this study, teachers' mastery experiences could be viewed as assisting children to achieve academic and developmental goals. For example, Nina and Eva claimed that it was "exciting" and "fascinating" to watch children progressing due to their efforts. Similarly, Wendy expressed her contentment when she resolved children's emotional problems. Children's progress is associated with teacher self-efficacy (Guo et al., 2010) and teachers who report higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to score high on teacher-child closeness (Gastaldi et al., 2014).

Job Stress

Four major stressors came to light in the present research: workload, teacher-parent conflict, lacking organizational support, and insufficient training about working with children and families living in poverty. Teachers' workload stress is associated with teacher-students conflict (Mantzicopoulos, 2005). Teachers who perceive their job as having high demands (e.g., multiple responsibilities, many interruptions) and as not allowing enough time to complete tasks tend to report more conflict with children (Whitaker et al., 2015). According to Nina, Head Start teachers' roles went beyond teaching -- they were also nurses, mediators, and social workers. Long working hours and frequently absent staff members also contributed to Head Start teachers' job stress. Eva admitted that her patience grew thin after a long day, and she was more likely to demonstrate punitive behaviors when she was stressed.

Teachers' relationships with parents influence their perception of the children (Wyrick & Rudasill, 2009). In this study, teachers expressed their frustrations when they experienced a lack of parental support. All participants commented on what they perceived as the irresponsibility of parents. For example, Nina mentioned that some parents left all education

responsibilities and training in daily routines to the teachers; this enhanced role inevitably contributed to teachers' workload, and therefore, also added to job stress. Also, Wendy indicated that Head Start children faced a "lack of role models at home." Teachers' negative comments towards parents signified a possible stereotypical view about families living in poverty, which may have influenced their education practices and relationships with children. This consistent negative view of parental involvement in Head Start may be attributed to the insufficient training about working with disadvantaged families. As Nina indicated in her interview, teachers might not be fully prepared to teach children from lower-SES families. She suggested that Head Start teachers, especially novice teachers, lacked the specific knowledge and skills to handle problems that Head Start children brought into classrooms, such as parental divorce and problem behaviors. It is undeniable that poverty is associated with a number of negative outcomes (Mercer & DeRosier, 2008), but viewing children and family through a deficit lens may influence teachers' practices and their relationships with children (Couch, 2014). The current results reaffirm that it is crucial for teacher preparatory programs to educate teachers about challenges of living in poverty and how to teach and care for children from this particular population.

Another component that emerged under the theme of stress was teacher-perceived insufficient organizational support. Insufficient organizational support might add to teacher perceived stress, which may subsequently contribute to negative teacher-child interactions. For instance, Wendy expressed her frustration when she had to implement her supervisor's ideas with which she did not agree. A lack of decision-making authority decreases teachers' feelings of autonomy; as a result, it may leave teachers with fewer opportunities to demonstrate approach-type behaviors, which are often categorized as indicators of closeness in teacher-child relationships (Whitaker et al., 2015). Furthermore, Fantuzzo et al. (2012) reported a correlation between teacher-rated organizational support and teacher-child relationships.

Nina's comment about challenging social dynamics brought our attention to broad ecological factors that might influence teacher-child relationships. It is not news that teachers currently are dealing with parenting situations such as single mothers/fathers, teen parents and other nontraditional family situations (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011). Teachers working with children from lower-SES backgrounds are more likely to encounter problems associated with these challenging social dynamics (Mercer & DeRosier, 2008). Nina's remark raised the awareness regarding a possible missing piece in teacher education, targeted education to prepare teachers to teach in schools serving disadvantages children and families. Her comments implied that teachers were likely to miss opportunities to bond with children and to offer appropriate care when problems associated with challenging social dynamics arose.

The results of the present research highlighted the role of teacher self-efficacy and job stress in teacher-child relationships in Head Start. The increasing demands of supervisory visits and accountability are to ensure program quality and child outcomes (Whitaker et al., 2015). However, with insufficient organizational support, (e.g., miscommunications between teacher and supervisors and limited decision-making authority) these well-meaning strategies may inadvertently add to teachers' work stress and negatively influence teacher-child interactions by occupying the time that could have been used to interact with children or contributing to teacher-child conflict. The results also have potential implications for teacher education. Teacher preparatory programs should help teachers understand the challenges of impoverished families and overcome their potentially stereotypical opinions toward them, in order to better serve this particular population.

Implementation, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study revealed teacher factors that influenced Head Start teacher-child relationships. Accordingly, the data were able to provide vivid examples of factors that teachers believed to have influenced their relationships with children. The study results allowed us to discern a number of teacher factors that seem consistent with findings of prior research. We also were able to identify two additional factors within teachers' experiences that have not been thoroughly researched: children's progress and the reciprocity of education and experience.

The drawbacks of the present study are recognized. Like other qualitative studies, participants' answers might be subject to social desirability. The conclusions are tentative and are not intended to be generalized. The number of participants was limited. Additionally, all three participants were site leads. Considering that one of their sources of self-efficacy was their decision-making authority, the results of interviewing more typical teachers, who had less authority, might be different. Furthermore, the observational data were somewhat limited. Thirty minutes to an hour of observation per teacher may have been too short for some potentially interesting phenomena to emerge. Subsequent investigations have improved upon our methodology by including a second interview for all participants and an extended observation period. Despite the limitations to the present study, the results offered a novel perspective on teacher-child relationship building in Head Start; it also paves the way for future research projects.

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