How do Head Start Staff Characteristics Relate to Parent Involvement and Satisfaction?

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This poster reports descriptive information collected for the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) conducted for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. It includes:

- Head Start staff experience, education, and training;
- Staff-reported information about how parent volunteers are utilized and the types and frequency of contacts between Head Start staff and parents;
- Teacher-reported information about the types and frequencies of activities for children in Head Start classrooms.

In addition, the poster includes descriptions of the relationships of staff-reported information and three aspects of parent-reported information. These are: (1) parent satisfaction; (2) parent participation in the Head Start program; and, (3) changes in parent-child activities at home over the program year.

Overview of the Staff Sample

The staff in approximately 180 Head Start Centers and over 500 classrooms in 40 programs across the country were interviewed between spring of 1997 and spring of 1998. In each program, coordinators for the education, health, parent involvement and social services components were interviewed. Center level staff interviewed included center directors, lead teachers (those with center management responsibilities as well as classroom duties), and teachers in classrooms where selected children were enrolled. The interviews collected information about staff experience, education, and training as well as about staff attitudes and activities with the parents and children enrolled in their Head Start program.

The following numbers of staff were interviewed:

- 162 Component Coordinators (Education, Health, Parent Involvement, and Social Service Coordinators)
- 99 Center Directors
- 529 Lead teachers and classroom teachers

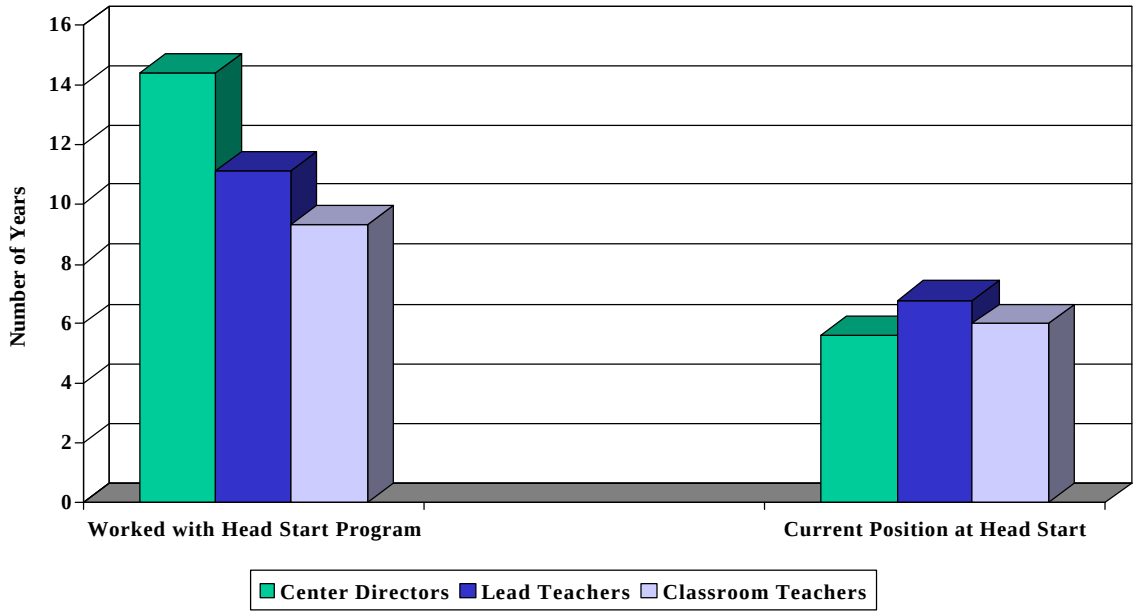
Years of Staff Experience in Head Start

- Component coordinators reported an average of about 12 years of experience with Head Start.

- The average number of years of experience with Head Start reported by center-level staff in Figure 1are:

- 14.4 years Center Directors
- 11.1 years Lead Teachers
- 9.3 years Classroom Teachers

Figure 1
Center Director and Teacher Experience in any Head Start Program and in Current Position



- Center Directors report that they have been in their current Head Start position about 5 years on average, while lead teachers and classroom teachers have been in their current staff positions for an average of approximately 6 years.

- Over 80 percent of Center Directors and Teachers have experience with other preschool programs, adding about 5 years to their experience with Head Start.

- About half of Center Directors and Teachers are parents of Head Start children or had other children from their household attend Head Start at some time.

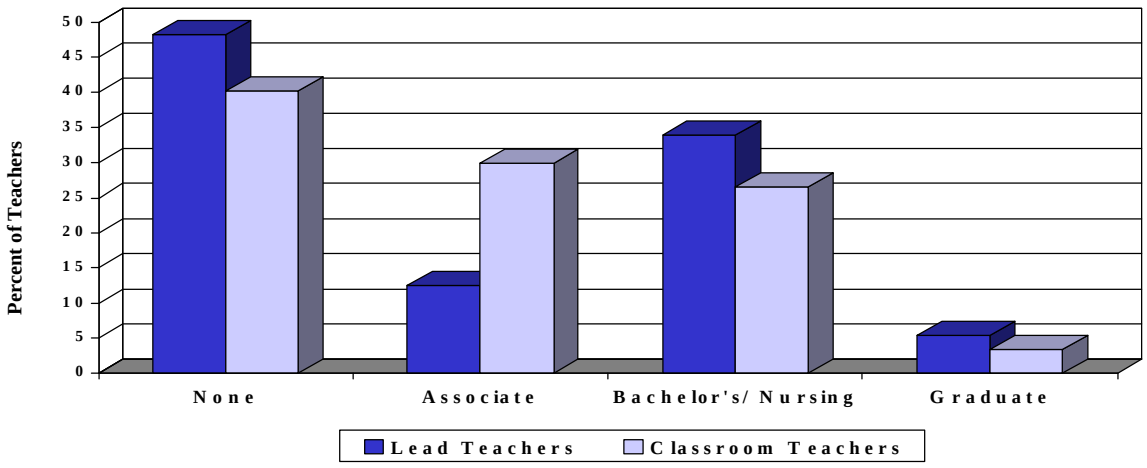
Staff Education

- Over 60 percent of Component Coordinators have at least a four-year, including bachelor's or master's degrees; a higher proportion of Education Coordinators have graduate degrees (29 percent) than coordinators in the other areas (3-13 percent). About 27 percent of Head Start Directors have an associate's degree, almost 30 percent have a bachelor's degree, and about 13 percent have a graduate degree.

- Head Start teachers report completing about 14.5 years of schooling on average. The majority of teachers have some college education. About 35 percent of classroom teachers have completed 1-2 years of college; 28 percent of classroom teachers have completed 3-4 years of college.

- Almost half of the lead teachers and classroom teachers have no degrees beyond high school. About 35 percent of all teachers have a bachelor's or a graduate degree.

Figure 2
Degrees Completed by Head Start Teachers



- Over 75 percent of teachers with degrees at the BA level or higher majored in Education or Early Childhood Education.

- About half of teachers have a CDA, either with a preschool or elementary education teaching certificate or alone. About 30 percent of Head Start teachers have a teaching certificate, either combined with a CDA or alone.

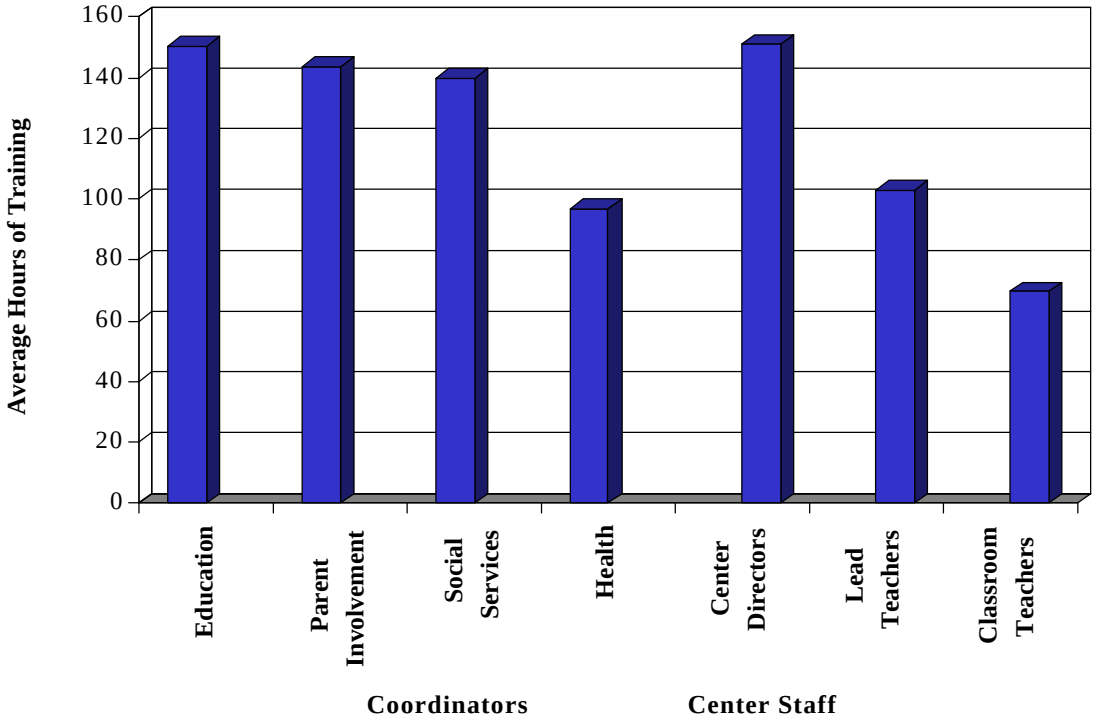
Staff Training Through Head Start

Average Numbers of Hours of Training Received

- Except for Health Coordinators, component coordinators and Center Directors reported that they had participated, on average, in approximately 140 - 150 hours of training that was provided by their Head Start program during the past 12 months. Center Directors and Education Coordinators reported the highest number of hours received. Health Coordinators reported the least number of hours (about 100), possibly because they had already been trained in the health field.

- Lead teachers (those with administrative as well as classroom duties) reported about 100 hours, compared with classroom teachers who reported about 70 hours of training.

Figure 3
Staff Training Received Through Head Start During the Prior 12 Months



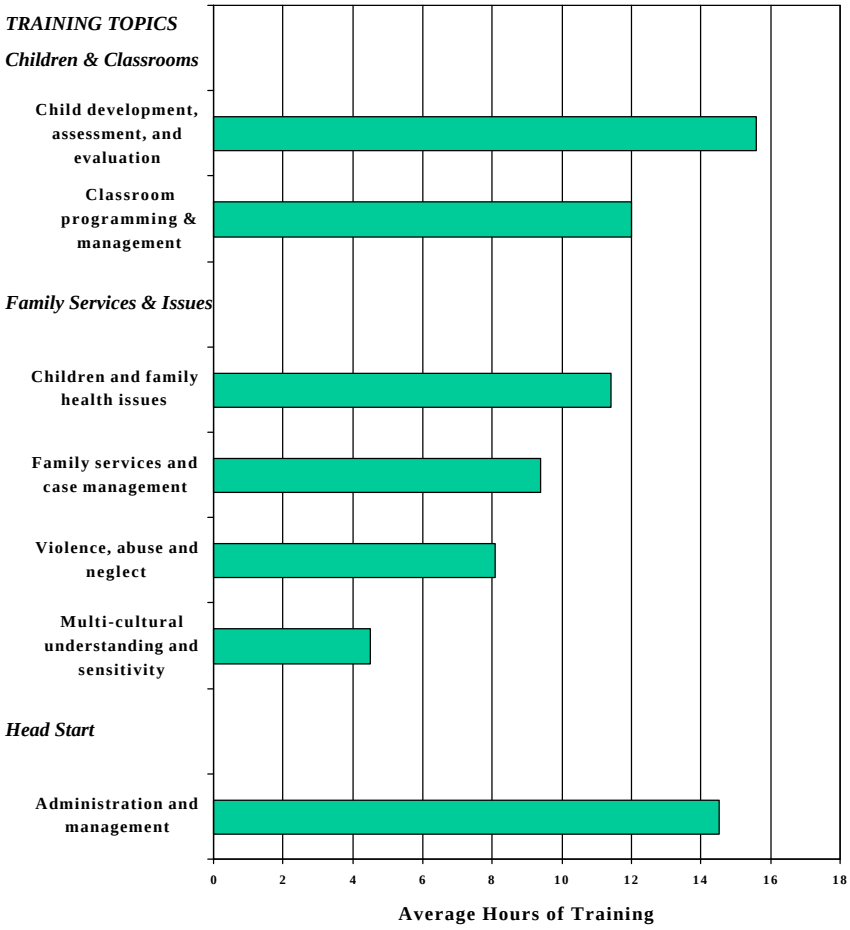
Head Start Teacher Training Topics

- Approximately 40 percent of training hours provided for classroom teachers (almost 30 hours per year) were devoted to: child development; child assessment or evaluation; and educational programming and management.

- Teachers also reported participating in training related to providing services to families including, on average, approximately 11 hours on child and family health; 9 hours specifically targeted to family services and case management; 8 hours on dealing with domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, and substance abuse issues; and about 5 hours on multi-cultural sensitivity and bilingual education.

- The third general area of training that teachers reported was Head Start administrative and management topics, such as providing supervision to staff and a review of Head Start principles and practices, where approximately 14 hours of training was provided over a 12-month period.

Figure 4
Teacher Training Received During the Prior 12 Months



- The two topics in which teachers said they wanted more training were: (1) family services and case management; and (2) classroom programming and management.

Teacher-Reported Uses of Parent Volunteers

Activities at the Center and in the Classroom

- Over 90 percent of teachers reported that parent volunteers in their classrooms assisted during mealtimes, helped to clean up classrooms, served as classroom aides, and assisted at special events during the past Head Start year.

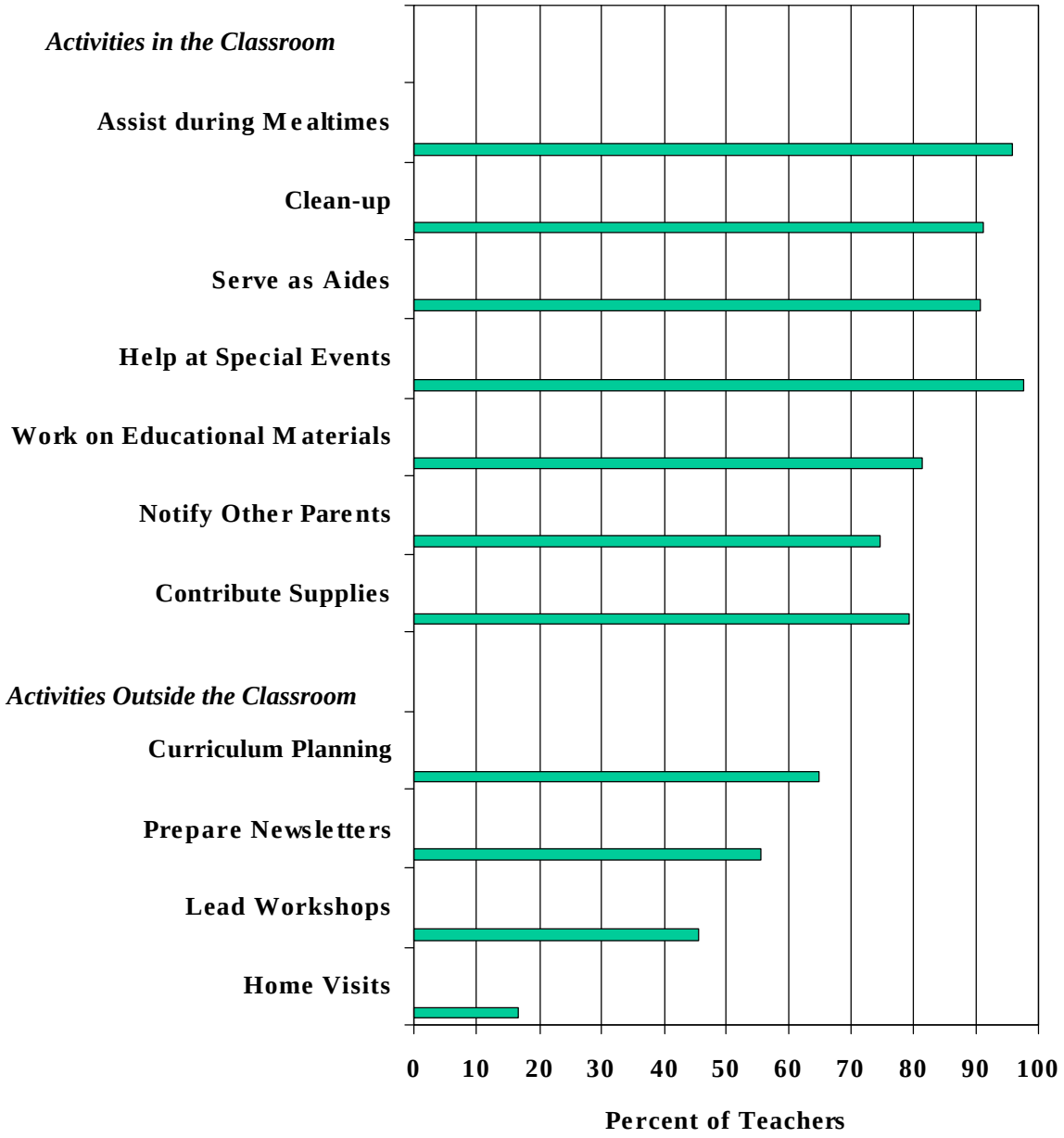
- Approximately 70-80 percent of teachers reported that parent volunteers in their classrooms assisted in preparing educational materials, notified parents about upcoming meetings or events, or contributed supplies.

Activities outside the Center and Classroom

- A somewhat lower percentage of teachers, approximately 45 - 65 percent, involved parent volunteers in somewhat higher level tasks, such as assisting with curriculum planning, preparing newsletters, or preparing or leading workshops.

- Only about 16 percent of teachers reported using parent volunteers to assist in home visits to other Head Start parents.

Figure 5
Uses of Parent Volunteers Reported by Teachers



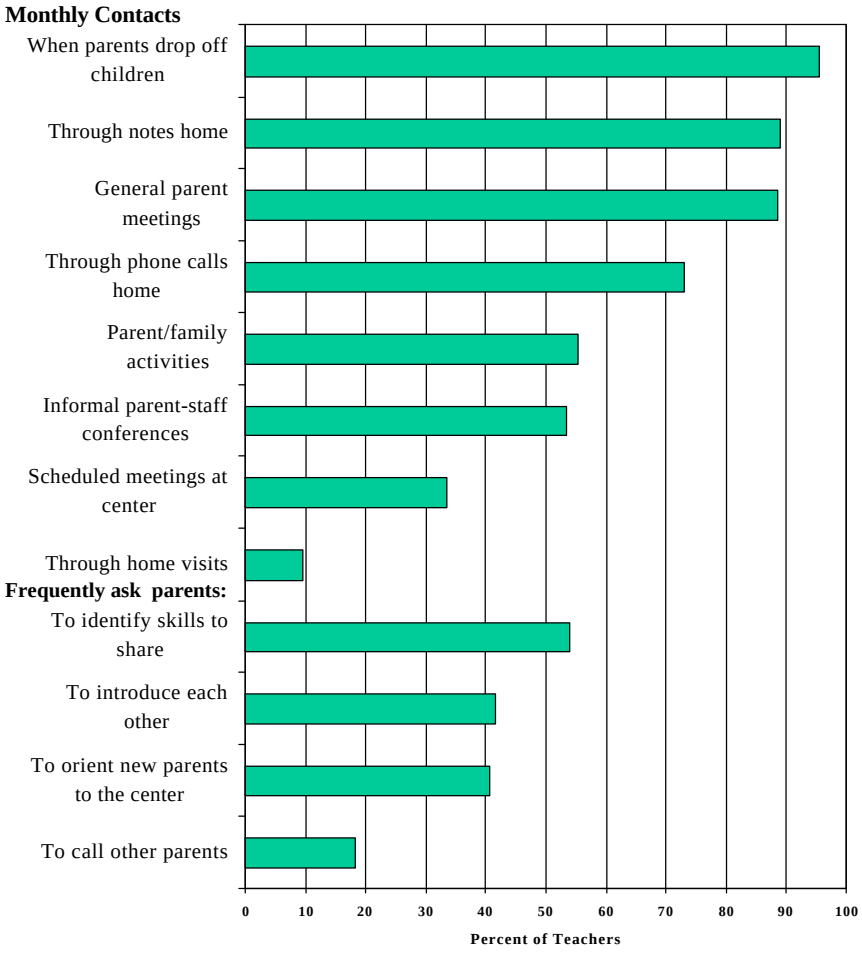
Teacher-Reported Contact with Parents

- Teachers use a variety of ways to keep in contact with parents. Most teachers report ***at least monthly contact*** with parents through informal means, such as when parents drop off their children or at general parent meetings and through notes and phone calls home.

- About half the teachers report ***at least monthly contact*** with parents at parent/family activities and informal parent-staff conferences, while about a third report monthly contact at scheduled meetings with parents at the center, and about 10 percent through home visits.

- Teachers report that they ***often*** ask parents to participate in ways designed to help them meet and develop relationships with other Head Start parents. For instance, 54 percent of teachers say they ask parents to identify skills they can share with other parents, about 41 percent say they introduce parents to one another or ask parents to orient new parents to the center, and about 18 percent that they ask parents to call other parents.

Figure 6
Teacher-Reported Contacts with Parents



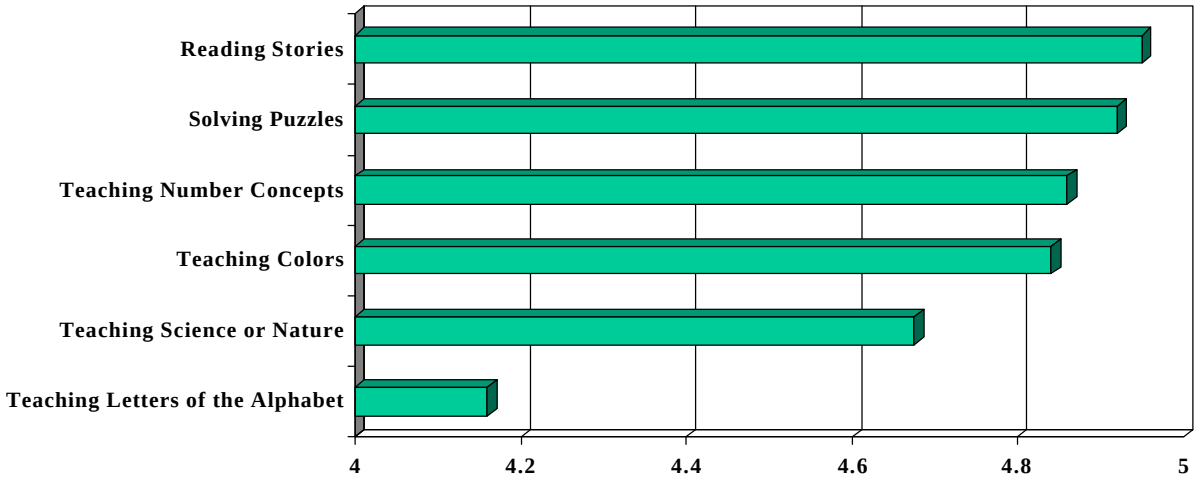
Teacher-Reported Activities with Children in the Classroom

Academically Oriented Classroom Activities

- Head Start teachers reported that they teach number concepts, colors, and natural science as well as read stories to the children in their classrooms almost daily; and that children in their classrooms work on puzzles almost daily.

- Teachers reported that they teach letters of the alphabet in their classrooms about once a week on average, substantially less frequently than other academic activities.

Figure 7
Relative Frequency of Academically Oriented Classroom Activities



Scale:
1=Never; 2=Less than once a month; 3=Once a month or more; 4=About once a week; 5=Daily or Almost Daily

Other Classroom Activities

- Head Start teachers reported that the children in their classrooms engage in visual and performing art activities, as well as health and hygiene activities almost daily.

- The children also engage in block building, free play, and indoor and outdoor physical activities almost daily.

Parent-reported Satisfaction and Participation in Head Start, and Interactive Activities with the Head Start Child

Over 2,500 parents reported their activities with the Head Start child in fall, 1997 and again in spring, 1998; parents also reported their satisfaction with the Head Start program and their involvement with the program in spring, 1998.

Satisfaction. Parents were asked how satisfied they were with eight aspects of the Head Start experience for their child, themselves, and their family. A 4-point response set was employed (very satisfied, satisfied, unsatisfied, very unsatisfied). A factor analysis revealed high positive intercorrelations of all items and a single factor. It is important to note that parent satisfaction with all aspects of the Head Start program is extremely high. *The total satisfaction score, across all parents and aspects, exceeds 90 percent of the maximum score*. A summary score for parent satisfaction was computed by summing all eight items.

Parent involvement with Head Start. Parents were asked how often they had taken part in 14 types of activities at their child's Head Start center/program since the beginning of the Head Start year. A four-point response set was employed (not yet, once or twice, or three more times). A factor analysis revealed high positive intercorrelations of all items and a single factor. Therefore, a summary score for parent involvement was computed by summing all 14 items.

Interactive Family Activities with the Child. In both fall, 1997 and spring, 1998, parents were asked how often someone at home had participated in each of 11 activities with the Head Start child. A three-point response set was employed (no, once or twice, or three more times). A factor analysis revealed high positive intercorrelations of all items and a single factor. Therefore, a summary score for family activities with the child in the fall, 1997 and spring, 1998 was computed by summing all 11 items to a score with a maximum of 22.

Relationships among Head Start Staff Characteristics, Uses of Parent Volunteers, and Contacts with Parents with Parent-reported Satisfaction, Involvement, and Interactive Activities with the Head Start Child

Relationships between teacher characteristics and teacher-reported interactions with parents and children with three parent-reported measures were explored using multilevel regression models. As indicated above, the three parent-reported measures are (1) parent satisfaction, (2) parent involvement, and (3) *change* in activities with the child between fall, 1997 and spring, 1998.

These parent measures are reported by individual parents in all Head Start centers in the sample. In contrast, the teacher characteristics and other teacher-reported data provided by teachers about their classrooms or centers are aggregated across a center. Thus, the information for these analyses represent both individual and center-level data. These types of multilevel data are common in educational research, where individuals (parents or, more typically, students) are clustered or nested within classrooms or schools. To capture the variability of parent responses within each Head Start center, we used the SAS procedure "PROC MIXED" to fit hierarchical or multilevel regression models to estimate the relationships among the various levels of data. For example, we explore whether parents report different levels of parent involvement in centers where teachers have more in-service training.

For each analysis, a set of center-level teacher-reported variables were entered into the analyses to provide information about their relationship with the parent-reported measures, controlling for family demographic variables. The individual center-level and demographic variables were chosen based on significant univariate correlations with the parent-reported measures.

Results: Variables Relating to Parent Satisfaction

- Parent Satisfaction is related to three parent/family characteristics: (1) less educated parents were more satisfied ($F= 3.98$; $p<.02$); (2) Hispanic parents were more satisfied ($F= 3.68$; $p<.02$); and (3) households with lower income reported greater satisfaction ($F= 25.68$; $p<.0001$)

- After controlling for these family demographics and characteristics, greater satisfaction with the Head Start program was reported by parents in centers where: (1) teachers reported using parent volunteers more frequently in activities outside the classroom ($F= 4.60$; $p<.05$); (2) teachers reported more non-routine types of parent contacts ($F= 8.62$; $p<.01$) ;

Non-routine types of parent contact included:

- Meetings with parents at parent/family activities;
- Sending written notes home;
- Exploring parent skills that may be shared with other families; and
- Encouraging returning families to orient newer families to the center activities.

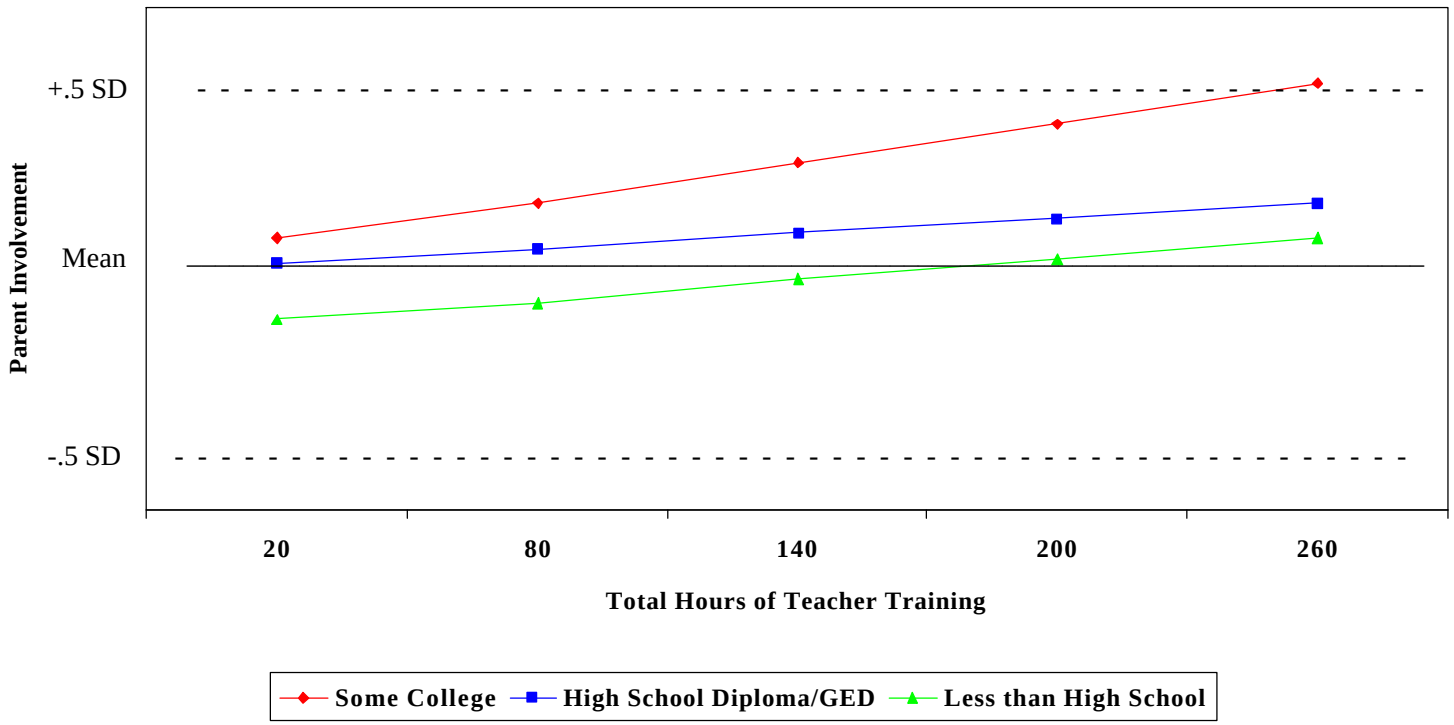
Results: Variables Relating to Parent Involvement

- Parent Involvement was related to four parent/family characteristics: (1) Parent involvement was greater when the children had been enrolled in Head Start for a longer period ($F= 12.92$; $p<.001$); (2) Parent involvement was greater among parents who were more educated ($F= 11.42$; $p<.0001$); (3) Parent involvement was greater among the parents not currently employed ($F= 18.81$; $p<.0001$); and (4) Parent involvement was greater for white and other ethnic groups in comparison to black and Hispanic families ($F= 3.02$; $p<.05$).

- After controlling for these family demographics and characteristics, greater involvement in Head Start activities was reported in centers where: (1) Teachers reported receiving a greater number of in-service training hours ($F= 5.05$; $p<.05$); and (2) A greater proportion of teachers had preschool or elementary education teaching certificates ($F= 11.7$; $p<.001$);

Figure 8 is an illustration of the relationship of teacher in-service training hours with parent involvement at three levels of parent education. Each of the levels represents about one third of the parents surveyed. The overall relationship is significant, and the relationship for parents with some college education is significant, but for parents who completed high school or less, the relationship is non-significant (although the interaction between parent education and program involvement is not significant, either). These results indicate that, while increased teacher training is positively related to higher levels of parent involvement, the relationship is strongest among parents with more education. Therefore, it would suggest that a greater number of training hours alone might not have a significant impact upon the program involvement of parents who might benefit most from such involvement, and some additional effort might be necessary to draw such parents into greater levels of involvement in program activities.

Figure 8
Relationship Between Hours of Teacher Training and Parent Involvement in Head Start by Parent Education Level*



* This figure illustrates predicted parent involvement scores controlling for parent ethnicity, parent employment status, and length of child's enrollment in Head Start

Results: Variables Relating to Interactive Activity with the Head Start Child

- Parent/family interactive activities with the Head Start child increased during the Head Start program year ($t= 15.6$; $p<.001$). Across all families, the interactive activities score increased by 1.6 (maximum = 22)

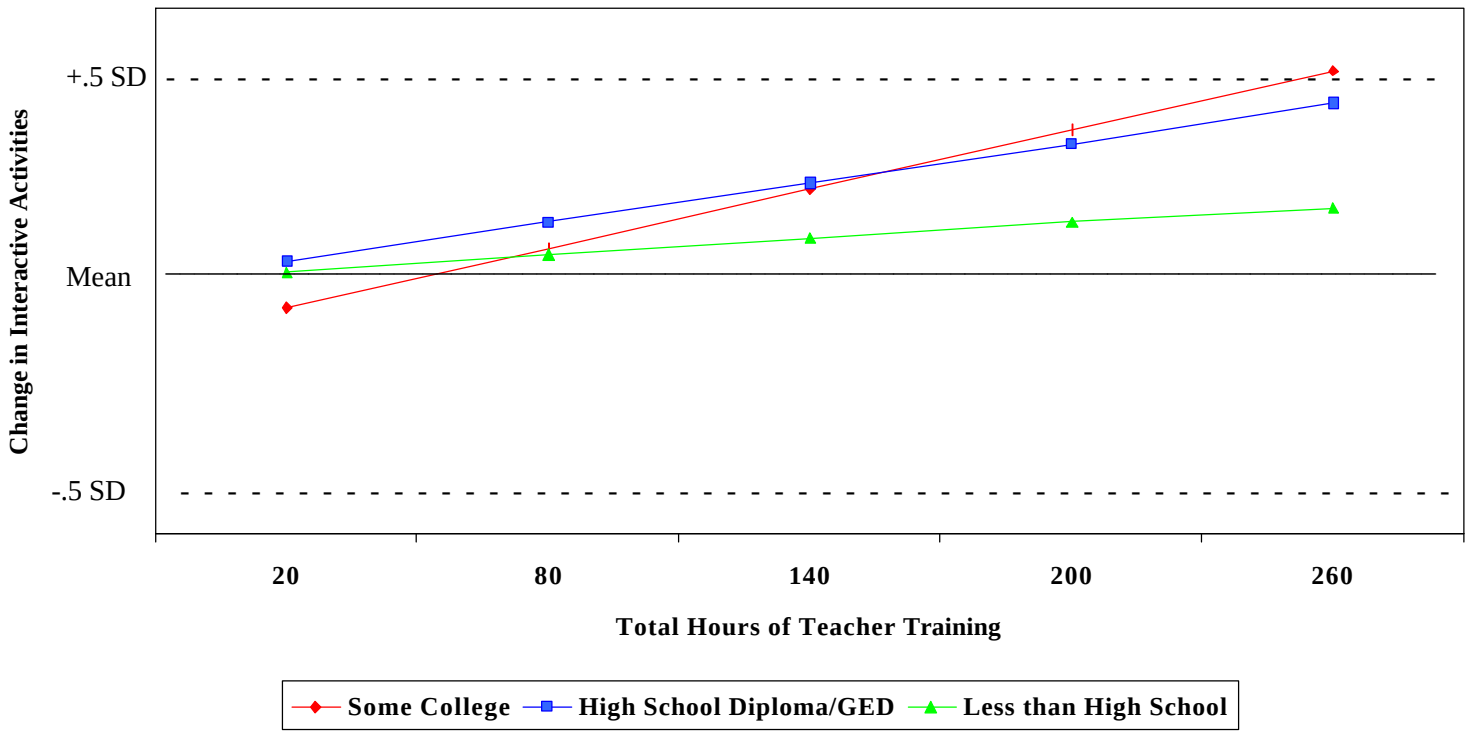
- The standardized change score in family interactive activities with the Head Start child was computed. This form of a change score is computed as Spring score/standard deviation (spring) minus fall score/standard deviation (fall)

- No measure of family demographics and characteristics was related to the standardized change score

- Interactive activities with children increased more in centers where: (1) Teachers reported greater numbers of in-service training hours ($F= 5.88$; $p<.02$); (2) Teachers reported more frequent academic activities with children in the classroom ($F= 6.71$; $p<.02$);

Figure 9 is an illustration of the relationship of teacher training hours with increases in interactive activities with the Head Start child. The overall relationship between parent education and change in interactive activities is *not* significant. However, for parents with at least a high school diploma or GED, the relationship with teacher in-service training is slightly more pronounced than for those with less than a high school education. In addition, the relationship of more frequent academic classroom activities with increased family activities with children while at home may be an important relationship for future exploration.

Figure 9
Relationship Between Hours of Teacher Training and Change in Interactive Activities at Home*



* This figure illustrates predicted change in parent-child activities controlling for parent ethnicity, parent employment status, and length of child's enrollment in Head Start.

DISCUSSION

The relationships between Head Start center-level characteristics with parent involvement and satisfaction have important implications for Head Start activities and policy. The preliminary results from these analyses suggest that centers which involve parents in non-routine activities and teacher-parent contacts lead to higher levels of parent satisfaction with the program. Over the years, parents have been vocal advocates for the Head Start program. Nearly all classroom teachers reported that parent volunteers in their classrooms assist with routine classroom activities. The results from the FACES data suggest that when teachers go beyond the routine use of parents in the classrooms, it is related to greater satisfaction, controlling for family demographic variables.

Parent involvement is a cornerstone of the Head Start program. The results from the interviews with Head Start staff indicate that, while many teaching and administrative staff have some college education and teaching credentials and a good deal of in-service training experience at Head Start, there is significant variability across centers in these experiences. More importantly, staff in-service training and teacher certification were found to be linked with parent involvement in the program, controlling for parent education, ethnicity, employment status, and prior experience with Head Start. These results suggest that keeping parents involved in the program at high levels requires skill; that teachers who have had more education specific to classroom teaching, culminating in teacher certification, may be more adept at working with parents. Similarly, in-staff training appears to be an important ingredient in increasing or reinforcing this skill. Future analyses will explore whether specific training topics are particularly strongly related to parent involvement.

One Head Start performance objective is to strengthen families as the primary nurturers of their children. Thus, the educational and interactive activities that family members do at home with their children are key to increasing and supporting children's school readiness skills. The results from the FACES data suggest that in centers where teachers have more in-service training and more academic activities with children while at Head Start, parents increase the variety of educational activities that they do with their children at home. The findings again point to the importance of staff in-service training.

Of course, it is important to point out that these relationships are correlational and exploratory. Thus, we cannot say, for example, that increasing parents' non-routine volunteer experiences would necessarily result in greater satisfaction. It is possible that other factors that have not been measured are contributing to these correlations. For example, teachers who ask parents to help with workshops or prepare newsletters may have other characteristics that also relate to parent satisfaction. Nevertheless, these relationships suggest that variables that are amenable to policy change (e.g., teacher in-service, requirements of teacher certification, wider range of parent volunteer activities) may have implications for further research on program improvement. These provocative findings will be explored further in future analyses as well as in discussions of Head Start policy.