### Background

- Head Start provides federally-funded education to low-income children and families. Children in Head Start are at an academic disadvantage due to poverty and fewer opportunities to engage in rich interactions important for growth and development (Khalfaoui et al., 2020).
- As the quality of teacher-child relationships increases, children feel more respected and safer in their classrooms (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). This sense of safety allows children to be more engaged and motivated in school (Khalfaoui et al., 2020).
- Children need to feel safe in school in order to learn and reach optimal development (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). When children feel safe, they are more inclined to take academic risks and explore their knowledge to help them become better students (Brookfield, 1995; Jensen, 2008).

**Research Question:** What are the strategies Head Start teachers use to create safe classroom climates for children?

### Methods

**Data Collection & Sample:**
- Flyers and in-person recruitment at Head Start schools and online registration using Qualtrics
- 90-minute in-person focus groups held at public libraries facilitated by one graduate student and one undergraduate research assistant
- Cash incentive of $20 was given for participation
- Convenience sample of Lead Teachers and Co-Teachers (n = 19) from Head Start classrooms in southwest Arizona
- 95%: Hispanic or LatinX, 100%: Female, 37%: $35-50K estimated household income per year, 63%: also had children in Head Start, Mean Head Start teaching experience: 14.5 years
- Focus groups were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed

**Analysis:** Data was double-coded using qualitative content analysis. A codebook was developed by the undergraduate researchers using data-based formation of codes (i.e., inductive category development; Mayring, 2000). Reliability checks were used to identify and reconcile any discrepancies in coding.

### Results

**Strategy 1: Providing consistency in the classroom**

Involves: providing routines, stability, and consistency

- "Teacher 1: I feel that it's really good to have routine, especially for children that are having challenging behavior. Just to know consistency, this is what's going to happen and routine. We're all here as a routine. I always think about challenging behavior or any child, but mostly challenging behavior—"
- Teacher 2: "It gives them less anxiety when they know what's going to come next, it calms them."
- Teacher 3: "It gives them security"

- "... it's very inconsistent in the home, family members they're here, they're not here and we're very consistent maybe the safety or the child might feel more-- They might feel more safe at school with us because we're consistent, we have a routine"

**Strategy 2: Building relationships with children**

Involves: providing care, love, socio-emotional-bonds, and trust

- "Whenever a child is feeling upset in the room or something is going on in the dynamics of the home, whenever I comfort them or whenever I'm hearing them out I always say, "I'm here to keep you safe, I love you and I'm here for you." I always let them know that this is a safe environment, this is an environment where we love you, where we like to see you grow, you're safe here. There's always that word--"

- "I think caring adults - they feel safe to stay with us. They feel loved. They feel trust. That they are safe and they're ready to learn"

**Strategy 3: Using positive guidance**

Involves: promoting positive wording and redirection

- "... the positive guidance just gives them a lot more self-esteem and more security of what they're doing. They feel more confident when they're at school."

### Conclusions and Implications

- Head Start teachers in this community promote safe classroom climates by providing children with consistency, building teacher-child relationships, and using positive guidance.
- Providing consistency in the classroom is the most prominent way Head Start teachers described how they implement safe classroom climates.
- The consistency provided in the classroom was sometimes described as having compensatory implications for children with inconsistent household environments. Teachers describe children as having less anxiety with consistency.
- Head Start teachers recount that building personal connections between themselves and children allow children to feel secure and comfortable. This empowers children to focus their energy on learning versus safety (Brookfield, 1995; Jensen, 2008).
- Additional research is needed to investigate the strategies utilized to create a safe classroom climate in Head Start preschools.

### Limitations

- Data was drawn from a project that focused on home-classroom continuity. Therefore, questions on safe classroom climates were not explicitly asked of teachers.
- This convenience sample of Head Start teachers in a local community resulted in a small sample size.

### Acknowledgements

The authors of this project would like to thank the local Head Start community for their partnership and participation in this project. The authors also acknowledge funding from the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families and the Graduate and Professional Student Council at The University of Arizona.

The project described was supported by the Early Care and Education Research Scholars: Head Start Graduate Student Research Grants, Grant Number 90YR0112, with the amount of $24,951, from the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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