

Nutrition in the Early Childhood Program

Susan Dodd-Williams
Western Carolina University
Jamaica Program

EDCI 616: Teacher Leadership
Influencing Action Plan

Spring 2018

Introduction

Each day at 10:00 a.m. the class says prayers and my 15 Kindergarten girls march out to the bathroom to wash their hands. The girls then re-enter the classroom armed with their toxic weapons, a.k.a. the Lunch Pan. It is at this point that the cold sweat and chills begin to form on my brow. This is the moment, when in broad daylight, I begin to shudder and have what I now phrase as ... *“Lunch Pan Nightmares!”*

As I walk from table to table opening the containers in the lunch kits for the girls it is sometimes disheartening to see snacks or meals that lack the necessary nourishment which the children need to function on. According to Banks, (2017), lunchtime basically divides the school day in half and should be nutritious enough to maintain the energy and alertness for the second half. Some of the contents are clearly as a result of the deceiving T.V. ads and, mouth-watering billboards which flash the mind-boggling images of Fast Food! The sight of the sugar content alone causes my scale to tip as I feel as if those meaningless calories of junk are slipping into *my* digestive system.

Other schools which may have similar problems of poor nutrition in Jamaica, may attribute it to the high cost of healthful foods. For this reason, the Public schools in Jamaica have access to a special School Feeding Program which the Education Ministry has implemented to assist students who are in need of at least one free nutritious meal for the day. The National Health Fund conducted a research and the data revealed that the majority of Jamaicans have poor dietary habits causing a high percentage of non-communicable lifestyle diseases, such as Obesity, Hypertension and Diabetes, Williams, (2017). Bearing this in mind, if children can be nutritionally educated, then perhaps we can combat this cycle of ill-health.

At my school the Mission Statement affirms that, “the school community works together as a family in close association with the parents for the total development of each child,” therefore, I have an obligation to ensure that the *total development* is catered to and this includes the topic to be addressed; **Nutrition in the Early Childhood Program.**

Situational Analysis and Perspective Taking	
My Perspective	Perspectives of Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The school where I have been teaching for over thirty years, is a prestigious all-girls school. The students ages range from 3+ to 12 years old. ▪ Many of the parents are professionals, some own their own business and there are also some very popular artistes from the music business. ▪ The majority of the students and their parents are well-travelled and some have even lived overseas at some point. Most students live in homes with both parents, however, a fair number of girls live with their mother. The majority of the children have a Nanny (Helper) at home who plays the role of caregiver while parents are out working. ▪ The lunches in the lunch pans are not creatively prepared in terms of colours, shapes, textures and sizes of items. ▪ One student had a beautiful lunch with green broccoli, purple grapes, red watermelon and orange cantaloupe. I began to call this a “Rainbow Lunch” and the girls looked forward to seeing these colourful lunches coming in. We eat with our eyes first and beautifully prepared lunches inspire us to eat them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students The students were very excited when they would bring Pizza, Burger King chicken nuggets, KFC wings or Patties for lunch. ▪ Some students would express their dislike for fruits and vegetables especially if another child was consuming it. This at times caused the eater some amount of discomfort. ▪ Students would open their lunch pan and express their disappointment, <i>I’m not going to eat this, it’s yucky and Mommy knows I don’t like to eat this!</i> It is possible that some parents were attempting to do what researchers, Steinsbekk, Bonneville-Roussy, Fildes, Llewellyn, and Wichstrøm, (2017) proposed, which was to continue to gently re-introduce foods which children were showing pickiness about and not originally accepting. However, perhaps the parents did not change the style of presentation of these previously rejected items.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As a Teacher Leader I feel it necessary to do my part in creating this change in my students to a healthier lifestyle. This will in turn result in having a healthier and more productive nation of working adults. ▪ Data necessary to complete this Action Plan will be retrieved from the initial interviews of Kindergarten Teachers, a Nutritionist, a Chef, feedback from Parents, newspaper, and online journal articles. ▪ Teachers Based upon the interviews held with the Kindergarten teachers regarding the lunch carried to school each day, many concerns were expressed. The meals did not appear to be thoughtfully prepared from a nutritional point of view. ▪ Some children were being overfed as no portion size was evident. ▪ The meals were not balanced. They either contained too much sugary items, too much salty items and they lacked a savoury item. ▪ Many lunch pans did not have a fruit or vegetable these only came occasionally. ▪ Too often the students would bring Fast food items for lunch. These were meals which most likely were purchased from the night before. ▪ Students mostly brought sugary drinks and little or no water. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Administrators During the interview the Principal expressed her support for such a venture with the Kindergarten Department and hoped that it would radiate like a nutritional movement throughout the entire school body. ▪ The Grade One students purchase lunch from the canteen. So perhaps after the two years in Kindergarten some really good eating habits would be inculcated in them and perhaps helping them to make better food choices in the school canteen which offers a variety of food. Once the demand for healthier options is made the supply will be forced to meet it. ▪ Parents An orientation to Kindergarten was held for 2 weeks during the Summer vacation before the girls began formal classes in September. It was at this introduction that 90% of the parents informed me that their child is a “<i>Picky Eater</i>.” It was so prevalent that I could recall the eating problems more than I could recall the names of my new students. ▪ At the first Class Meeting I made it a point to tell the parents that the eating habits of the students was a cause for concern. The parents expressed a desire to receive assistance with improving the nutrition of the students.
---	--

Investigation / Research	
The Issue	The Research/Known strategies
<p><u>Current information about the issue.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the feedback from interviews with the other Teachers, I realized that the issue of improper nutrition was of concern throughout the Kindergarten Department rather than confined to my classroom. The Parents acknowledged that they would like tips and ideas regarding ways of preparing “appropriately portioned, well balanced snacks that include inviting fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products,” (Bernath, & Masi, 2006, p.24), in order to provide better lunches for their daughter. The Children are not aware of which foods are nutritious and what we can refer to as ‘junk food.’ They consider cheese puffs as fine because after all they are made with ‘cheese,’ right? They need to play a responsible role in how they would like their bodies to look and feel. 	<p><u>Strategies research identifies as having successfully addressed or solved the issue</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some years ago, Nova South-Eastern University Preschool implemented a nutrition program which educated and supported the teachers, parents and students. The program made a successful change in the students’ habits making everyone more aware of proper nutrition. (Bernath, & Masi, 2006). This program had some good ideas with regards to Family Involvement and Education. Our team would be able to implement some of these in the Action Plan at our school in Jamaica. In an effort to combat Childhood Obesity and other illnesses like Type II Diabetes and Cardio Vascular Disease, the 2015 Child Nutrition Reauthorization was proposed in the U.S. to provide education and support to children regarding healthy nutritional habits. (Hard, Claire, MLIS & Koch. 2015). Research asserted that, “Nutrition education is an evidence-based, cost effective way to improve health outcomes and foster healthy eating habits for a lifetime” (Hard et al., 2015, p.1). Yardmici, et al., (2015), conducted research on various studies which emphasized the benefits of nutritional education. They further stipulate that the healthy nutritional habits which children learn at the preschool level at school or in the home can influence and impact the choices and practices made in adulthood which can protect individuals from challenges with their health (p.455). This is a message we could impress upon the parents in our school.

<u>Ideal Outcomes and Benefits</u>	The Research/ Known Strategies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An ideal outcome would be having Teachers become more aware of “effective strategies to incorporate healthy foods and messages about nutrition into young children’s learning environments.” (Kalich, Bauer, & McPartlin, 2014, p.8). Students spend so much time at school and are heavily influenced by what takes place there. ▪ Another outcome would be for Parents to be knowledgeable about proper nutrition and how this can help greatly with brain development in young children as well as the prevention of lifestyle illnesses later in their lives. ▪ The Children would benefit greatly if they are taught mindful eating habits. Helping children to understand that healthy foods can be fun to eat and that they help the body to grow in a healthy way. ▪ A very important outcome would be if children would no longer be yearning for the fast food fad items but should be able to know of and make healthier choices. ▪ Another positive outcome which would involve all constituents would be that of the administrators, teachers and the parents all becoming role models as we need to remember to practice what we preach by being a positive role model (Banks, 2017) We will have to <i>walk-the-walk</i> if we are going to <i>talk-the-talk</i>! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Researchers, Perera, Frei Linus, Frei Linus, Wong, & Bobe, (2015) conducted a survey on improving Nutrition in Elementary schools in Oregon in U.S. They reported on barriers which interfered with the success of the program and suggested ways to alleviate them. Many of the obstacles in those schools were similar to those experienced in my school here in Jamaica. Perera, et.al, 2015, concluded that, “unless the food environment at school and home reflects what is being taught, nutrition education will have limited impact on student’s food choices,” (p.47). The parents at my school have acknowledged the need for assistance however, they will have to follow through in all aspects for the Action Plan in order to create a positive result. ▪ Banks (2017), wrote an in-depth article entitled, “Eating Healthy at School.” She notes that the <i>Let’s Move!</i> initiative which was implemented by the Obama Administration in 2010, played a key role in improving the nutritional value of school lunches in order to combat childhood obesity. However, Banks, proposes that children not only need to be educated in nutrition and healthy eating but also whatever meals they are served at school should reflect the nature of what they are being taught. Banks also suggests that starting a school garden, providing links to home cooking and involvement in the whole process by teachers, parents and students would prove to be of great benefit to improving the nutrition in Early Childhood. In Jamaica, we have the agricultural potential and should be eating more meals from farm to table.

Likelihood of solving the issue
<p>I strongly feel that this action plan will effect changes in the nutrition of the Kindergarten children. The Teachers all agree that improvements need to take place in lunch pan prep.</p> <p>The parents will also be willing to partake in this venture knowing that they will now have support to fight some of the food battles they have been engaged in. No parent wishes to see their child suffer from the non-communicable lifestyle diseases like obesity, Diabetes or Hypertension especially when they know they are the adult and agent of nutritional change.</p> <p>Most children enjoy social eating. They like to feel grown-up and engaged in conversation and decision making. They also love attention and praise. They like to feel in charge and responsible. So, I believe that collectively we can empower the students to become <i>Young Nutrition Managers</i>.</p>

Actions / Steps	
Strategies to remediate the issue	Obstacles/Barriers to overcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Organize a Professional Learning Community (PLC). The teachers will begin the hard work collaborating and supporting the efforts. The PLC will not provide “a program nor a recipe,” for the preparation of the meals for the lunch pan, however, it will strengthen our commitment and focus on the mission of nutritional education (Dufour, 2016; cited in Blair, 2016, p.155). ▪ Collect feedback from parents regarding their issues as well as their willingness to be involved. Banks, (2017) proposed a host of ideas which would be extremely useful to alleviate the problems experienced with lunch pans. ▪ Sharing the issue with other community members who can be of assistance. This would include, a Nutritionist to provide advice and guidance on the nutritional needs of young children; a Chef/ Caterer to demo easy, healthy and creative meals suitable for the lunch pan; Companies like Grace Kennedy and Lasco Foods for sponsorship of affordable food items to be used in the lunch pan demos. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Affordability of healthful food. Parents perhaps need to compare the cost of purchasing healthy food versus the costs of dealing with the health issues which result from poor eating habits (Hard et al., 2015.) ▪ The parents lack of knowledge and creativity to prepare healthy lunches for children to be inspired into making a change. (Yardmici, et al., 2015). ▪ Time constraints for Teachers to meet to make plans and organize the strategies to alleviate the issue. ▪ Incorporating nutrition education into the curriculum rather than having it as a subject by itself. ▪ The definitive labelling of children as “Picky Eaters” needs to be refocused and instead parents should have more positive interactions with their children while guiding them in the way that they should be eating. (Walton, Kuczynski, Haycraft, Breen, & Haine, 2017.)

Steps to initiate change	
<p>1. <u>Communicating the issue</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The group initiative will be called <i>“Eat Right ... Be Bright!”</i> ▪ A Newsletter called <i>“Foodie News – Lunchbox Clues”</i> would be sent out to parents providing them with Nutrition Chunks and Tid-Bits, Quick and easy recipes, and even a shopping list of good buys or healthy food items to purchase on a budget. ▪ Parent Workshops with a Nutritionist and a Chef/Caterer to provide demos (Perera, et.al, 2015). <p>2. <u>Seeking permission to proceed and involving constituents</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First of all, the Principal and Vice Principal would be advised of the venture seeking their approval, support and permission to raise the issue to the other Staff members during New Business in our monthly Staff Meeting. ▪ Having observed due protocol, the concerns about the Lunch pans and Nutrition in Early Childhood would be raised, explaining how working together in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) can initiate a major change. All grade levels are welcome to provide feedback even if they are not able to work on the nutrition education team, however, the “collective ability to help all students learn” (Dufour, p.155), will be evident as some teachers may have valid ideas or possible networking contacts with other community members who can help to alleviate the issue. ▪ The President of the PTA would be consulted regarding allowing a Nutritionist to be a Guest Speaker to address the parents about the Importance of Nutrition in Early Childhood after which the group of Teacher Leaders for the <i>“Eat Right ... Be Bright!”</i> team can be introduced and their mission would be explained. ▪ During the Class Meetings each Kindergarten Teacher can extend a welcoming invitation to the Parent Group to be involved in the various activities which will be provided by our team. ▪ The young students will be asked to join in on the plans to become healthy and smart and embark on the experience of this exciting food journey. In class we will display pictures of healthy alternatives and make mini labelled food charts around our classroom, showing what delicious healthy lunches should look like. <p>3. <u>Exploring options and seeking buy-in from Community Groups.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explaining the initiative to a Nutritionist and asking their willingness to join the team to enlighten parents about proper portion size and balanced meals which include fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low fat dairy products. ▪ Engaging a Chef/Caterer to give some of their time with the team to conduct demonstrations on how to prepare creative and exciting healthy options that will appeal to the young child’s palate (Perera, et.al, 2015). ▪ Sending letters to companies explaining the initiative and seeking donations of food items to be used in the demo. This would naturally serve as an ad for their company. 	

Measuring success	Building leadership capacity and sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers would collect data of the snack and meal options and the eating patterns at the beginning of the school year when the team would start the “Eat Right ... Be Bright!” initiative. During the school term ongoing measurement of success would be discussed, this would help with transparency and commitment for the Trailblazers, Pioneers, Settlers, Stay-at-Homes and Saboteur characters who are involved in the nutrition reform program. (Schlecty 2016; as cited in Blair, 2016p.81) ▪ The success of the parents would be measured based on whether they are experiencing any challenges and to find out if the workshops provide them with nutritional alternatives and a more creative approach to packing lunch pans. ▪ We would also need to measure the success of the most important constituents. We would need to question if they are happy with the change. We would need to observe if they are more alert and performing better academically and also if there are fewer illnesses as they build healthier immune systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ According to Katzenmeyer& Moller, 2016; as cited in Blair, (2016), “a professional learning community provides the best buffer we have to prevent this level of disturbance to sustainability of improvements of efforts” (p. 126). As the team of Kindergarten Teachers share leadership responsibilities and collaborate with parents then the shared vision to teach nutrition education to the children, will result in a successful, positive and long- lasting team effort (Katzenmeyer & Moller). ▪ In building the leadership capacity and sustainability of this initiative the teachers would engage in quality professional development. The group would share assessments and success stories and also express where further support may be needed. The “Eat Right ... Be Bright!” team would work together empowering and learning from each other as we inspire each other, praise efforts and re-commit to our shared goal (Angelle 2016; as cited in Blair, 2016, p.107), of improving Nutrition in Early Childhood.

Conclusion

One of our School Goals is to *‘develop correct attitudes to work and life. To provide her with the knowledge and skills necessary for living today.’* Bernath & Masi (2006) state that, “Instilling nutrition concepts at an early age can influence a lifetime of food choices and balance” (p.21) and in doing so the students will be knowledgeable of better nutritional habits and many of the lifestyle illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity can be curtailed.

Although I have localized the issue of nutrition in early childhood to the situation at my school, which is an affluent Preparatory school. I would like to also note that poor nutrition is an island wide issue in schools affecting the children in Jamaica and their ability to learn. This month, March 2018, saw two positive initiatives taking place one is the mandate for the implementation of tax on sugary drinks and also banning these health hazards from the easy access of school canteens, (Jamaica Gleaner Online 2018). This will make them more expensive and coerce individuals into drinking more water! The second enterprise involves the children in need of nutritional support in the Public Schools. Restaurants of Jamaica under the Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) - *Add Hope* initiative donated \$4.5 Million Dollars to assist the School Feeding Program through to June 2018. Their follow up plan is slated for September 2018. Our school feeding program provides breakfast or lunch to about 300,000 students in 800 schools. (Jamaica Information Service, 2018).

Having a Protagonist and ENFJ personality according to the Myers-Briggs Inventory and Carl Jung's Theory allows me the deep pleasure of working with a team in making the difference in a child's life, not only academically and socially but also physically and nutritionally. Being a Protagonist will give me the drive to plan out strategies, work along with others and provide the necessary guidance to help alleviate the issue and help improve the nutrition education in the Kindergarten Department.

I consider myself as having many of the skills necessary for good Teacher Leadership proposed by, Angelle 2016, (p.107), I am very organized, committed, willing to work collaboratively with teachers, parents, students, and ready to take the risk of embarking on this action plan to effect this change in the Nutrition in the Early Childhood Program beginning with my school.

References

- Angelle, P.S. (2016). Teachers as Leaders. Collaborative Leadership for Learning Communities. In E.J. Blair, (Ed.) (2016). *Teacher leadership: The “new” foundations of teacher education-a reader* (2nd Edition) (p. 101-108). Peter Lang Publishers.
- Bernath, P. & Masi, W. (2006). Smart school snacks: A comprehensive preschool nutrition Education Program. *YC Young Children*, 61(3), 20-24.
- Retrieved from: URL <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42729404>
- Banks, S., (2017). Eating healthy at school - 19 Things you need to know. *Diet Spotlight*.
- Retrieved From: <https://www.dietspotlight.com>
- Blair, E. J. (Ed.) (2016). Teacher Leadership: The “New” Foundations of Teacher Education-a Reader. (2nd Edition). Peter Lang Publishers.
- Editor, (2018). Editorial | Mandate for tax on sugary drinks. *Jamaica Gleaner Online*
- Retrieved From: <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/>
- Hard, A., Uno, C., MLIS, & Koch, P.A. (2015). The Importance of Nutrition Education in the 2015 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. *Laurie M. Tisch Food, Education & Policy*. Retrieved From: <https://www.tc.columbia.edu>
- Kalich, K., Bauer, D. & McPartlin, D. (2014). Preschool: Creating the nutritionally purposeful classroom. *YC: Young Children* 69(5), 8-13.
- Retrieved from: Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/ycyoungchildren.69.5.8>
- Ministry of Education, Youth and Information, (2018). Additional support for school-feeding programme. *Jamaica Information Service*. Retrieved From: <http://www.moe.gov.jm>

Perera, T., Frei Linus, S., Frei Linus, B., Wong, S.S. & Bobe, G., (2015). Improving nutrition education in U.S. elementary schools: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of*

Education and Practice 6, (30), 41-50. Retrieved From: <https://files.eric.ed.gov>

Steinsbekk, S., Bonneville-Roussy, A., Fildes, A., Llewellyn, C.H., and Wichstrøm, L.

Child and parent predictors of picky eating from preschool to school age.

International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity 14(87)

Retrieved From: DOI: 10.1186/s12966-017-0542-7

Walton, K., Kuczynski L., Haycraft, E., Breen, A., and Haines, J. (2017).

Time to re-think picky eating: A relational approach to understanding picky eating.

International journal of behavioural nutrition and physical activity 14(62)

Retrieved From: DOI 10.1186/s12966-017-0520-0

Williams, R., (2017). Health Ministry on Mission to Reduce Obesity. *Jamaica Gleaner Online*.

Retrieved From: <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/>

Yardmici, H., ÖRMECİ, F.O., ÖZÇELİK, A.O., SÜRÜCÜOĞLU, M.S., ÖZDOĞAN, Y., (2015)

Nutrition education in preschool children. *The Journal of International Education*

Science 2 (5), 449-457. Retrieved From: <https://www.researchgate.net>