

Universal Pre-Kindergarten

The Impact of Preschool on Typically Developing Children in a Public Inclusion Program

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This study assessed the effects of an inclusive public preschool program in a middle-class district on typically developing students' social and cognitive growth, through a randomized trial experimental design.

An integrated public preschool program that was developed to allow children with disabilities to attend preschool in an inclusive setting with typically developing peers, uses a lottery to determine which typically developing children will enter the program. Typically developing children were therefore randomly assigned to either the treatment condition (attendance at the public school program) or comparison group (attendance at a community program or no program at all.) Sixty-seven children formed the experimental group. Seventy-six children from the wait list formed the comparison group

Classroom quality in the district was assessed using *ECERS-R*, *SELA*, *PCMI*, classroom observation, surveys, and interviews with teachers and district administrators. Although teachers tended to be well educated in community programs and the public school, public school teachers were more likely to have a Masters' degree. ECERS quality scores were moderate to relatively low across the district.

Children in the treatment and comparison groups were pre-tested in August of 2003 and post-tested in April of 2004 to determine both cognitive and social development, using: *Social Skills Rating System*, *Get Ready to Read!*, *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III*, and 3 subscales of the *Woodcock-Johnson-3rd Edition*.

The treatment (public program) group had significantly higher post-test scores on the Letter-Word identification subscale of the *WJ-III*. No significant differences were found on the remaining cognitive assessments, and findings from the social outcomes assessment were inconclusive.

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Collaboration and 4K Policy: Issues of communication, leadership and power.

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Historically in the United States, early childhood programming has been fragmented in terms of funding streams, resources and sponsoring agencies. Given this, universal access to preschool (UPK) is being positioned as an antidote to many educational and societal concerns for children (Barnett, Robin, Hustedt, & Schulman, 2003; Early, 2003; Raden, 2003). In addition, universal access coupled with a collaborative approach to policy making is seen as allowing key stakeholders the opportunities to raise their voices in the process (i.e., Sandfort & Selden, 2001). Our research indicates that collaborations and the leadership of such endeavors is complicated by various personal and agency agendas.

This is a research study of the Early Childhood Collaborative (ECC), an attempt among a local school district, Head Start, and university to implement universal access (4K) in a medium sized city in the Midwestern United States. Leadership in a collaborative setting became a central theme in our research (Chrislip, 2002; Senge, 1990; Strauss, 2002). Therefore, in this study we investigate collaborative leadership and offer suggestions for future early childhood initiatives. The goal of this research is to question the definition of collaboration, to examine what this means both theoretically and methodologically and suggest “next steps” for collaborative approaches to UPK.

The Early Childhood Collaborative (ECC) project is an instrumental case study. The first year of the ECC pilot program served four-year-olds in one attendance area of Arborville from August of 2003 to June of 2004. Approximately 43 children and their families were served at either the Head Start site or the public school site. Data were collected using participant observation, policy meeting minutes, lesson plans and parent communication. The analysis of the teacher’s interpretation of curriculum illustrates classroom perspectives regarding collaborative leadership. In terms of the analysis, the notion of policy as text and discourse illuminated certain freedoms or individual interpretations, as well as limitations (such as agency agenda) as we considered the role of leadership in how teachers came to understand curriculum (Ball, 1994).

Outcomes included recognition of teacher autonomy and subsequent interpretation of curriculum, improved student performance regardless of variations in curriculum and a desire at the classroom level to better understand participation in a collaborative process. The implications of this study suggest that generating a “collaborative process” takes a certain amount of education and training. This training would emphasize the need to recognize different types of expertise across the “hierarchy” that exists in current education administration programs (Honig, 2003). The authors of this project suggest consideration of a middle ground for addressing the needs of early childhood initiatives. Alternatives such as distributed leadership are proposed (Burch & Spillane, 2004) in terms of opening the possibilities for radical change and a creation of different ways of understanding individual and group influences. The research data indicated that a policy reform process that takes into consideration the nuanced dynamics of

communication through collaboration would improve overall teacher and classroom performance.

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