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Informing Parents and Educators about the importance of preschool for English Language Learners: A Guideline

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Informing Parents and Educators about the importance of preschool for English Language
Learners: A Guideline

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science in Education
Program

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Abstract

The importance of pre-kindergarten experience for English Language Learners is that it gives them a foundation for their kindergarten experience. Many Hispanic families are hesitant in putting their child in the care of someone who is not a family member, which then puts these children behind others who had an academic experience in pre-kindergarten. This not only brings the Hispanic children down academically but also fails to teach them about the social aspect of school. The purpose of this study is to give people involved with these children a guideline to help them understand the importance of pre-kindergarten education for English Language Learners. It will also offer strategies for teachers on how to communicate the importance of pre-kindergarten with this community.

Chapter 1 Introduction

After working as a paraeducator in a one room classroom for three consecutive years I noticed that the student population consists of Caucasian/White and Hispanic/Latino students. My first student was bilingual in both English and Spanish. He was able to read words but unable to sound out the letters in the word. My second student, I did not know if he spoke both languages because the year prior to starting kindergarten it is my observation that he did not speak either English or Spanish. Only when he was assigned to my class was I able to observe that he spoke both languages. I have experienced three Latino/Hispanic children who are both proficient in English and Spanish in the classroom. Each one has unique needs in education. Their strengths reside in math and their weakness in language arts. From these experiences there seems to be a disconnect from language arts with ELL (ELL). This disconnect gives these students a lack of confidence. By putting these students into a pre-kindergarten program, these students could greatly benefit from the academic and social offerings at the school. Thus, giving them confidence and a jump start in academics, having them ready for the kindergarten curriculum. As teachers, we need to create confident learners and I believe a pre-kindergarten program will give these students that confidence.

This year we have our first pre-kindergarten student who came to school knowing little English. I have never experienced working with someone who knew little English. She became my challenge! She had an inability to communicate her needs. The only language spoken in her house is Spanish. So when she came to school in the fall of 2011 she did not feel confident in communicating with me or the other teacher. She was having a hard time understanding the school environment such as following routines, classroom rules, and interacting with others. Since she visits her native country, Mexico, twice a year her English proficiency fluctuates after

coming back to California making it difficult to have her consistently exposed to a school environment where only English is spoken.

Statement of the Problem

Students that experience a pre-kindergarten program are much more academically and socially ready for kindergarten curriculum and environment. This program gives students, monolingual or bilingual, the ability to feel prepared and confident in what they will experience in kindergarten. The problem is not having students experiencing these programs. This leaves them at a disadvantage academically and socially. The implication is that these students will not be ready for kindergarten. Without any exposure to the academic side of school the teacher is left to start at ground zero with ELL who do not go to pre-kindergarten. Is pre-kindergarten essential in assisting ELL academically and socially? Can it bring these students success in kindergarten and throughout their academic pursuit?

Research Questions

What are the essential elements that a pre-kindergarten experience offers ELL? What strategies can be used to engage these ELL in the curriculum? What is the role of mentors in providing ELL with the tools necessary to build confidence in overall academic success? How can teachers communicate the importance of a pre-kindergarten experience with parents of ELL?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe the essential components of the pre-k experience for parents and teachers of ELL.

Theoretical Rationale

Erikson (1963) studied stages of development spanning the entire lifespan of humans. Erikson broke down these stages for a specific age group. Each stage of psychosocial development is marked by a conflict, for which successful resolution will result in a positive outcome. The stage

that serves as the framework for this research is the play stage which is initiative versus guilt. The age groups for this stage are preschoolers three to six years old. During this stage a healthy developing child learns to imagine, broaden his skills through active play of all sorts, including fantasy, to cooperate with others and to lead as well as to follow. If the child is immobilized by guilt he or she is fearful, hangs on the fringes of groups, continues to depend excessively on adults and is restricted both in the development of play skills and in imagination.

Assumptions

ELL do not have the tools to succeed in kindergarten due to lack of communication in English. Parents of ELL do not put their child into a pre-kindergarten program due to their financial situations and convenience of the proximity of the school. Parents, due to lack of knowledge, hold off on putting their child in school leading to them going to school 1 year late which could affect the maturity of the child. Due to cultural beliefs many “Hispanic/Latino families try to keep children home as much as possible before entering them into a school” (Shore, 2005, p.1). By providing mentors, a base start through a pre-kindergarten program, and measuring, through informal assessments, their academic success this study will provide guidance and strategies to use with their child inside and outside of the classroom.

Background and Need

“For those who speak little or no English, preschool can provide a valuable bilingual education” (Kagan as cited by Schwartz, 1996, p. 1). The topic is debated. Research from the literature follows a qualitative approach. Researching the topic of the importance of preschool for ELL seemed relevant. Bowman (1994) states the following: “Emphasize prevention... The preschool and primary years are critical ones if children are to be successful in school and we must

carefully review the treatment of children during these years to determine whether it is sufficiently responsive to cultural and linguistic differences”(p. 4).

Although the emphasis of the research is on trying to bridge the gap between the school culture and the ELL in preschool, the teacher is also held accountable in providing a culturally diverse learning environment. The article states, “Teachers, like all of us, make generalizations about other people, ideas, and events on the basis of their personal constructions of reality... Teachers have difficulty incorporating new visions of reality that conflict with their own personal beliefs and experience”(Ball as cited in Bowman, 1994, p.4). This research provides teachers with an understanding of the importance of preschool for ELL and how educators can build the important relationships cross-culturally.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

This section addresses the previously published material pertinent to the topic of the importance of preschool for ELL. The literature strongly shows the importance of preschool for ELL. The literature is predominately focused on Latino preschoolers who are bilingual. The literature also addresses the Head Start program which was initiated by President Johnson in 1965 which enabled low-income family preschoolers to attend a federal funded program.

Historical Context

Head Start was the first publicly funded preschool program created in 1965 by President Johnson. It began as a summer program through local public schools with an enrollment of 561,000 three and four year olds. In 1966 the success of the summer programs led to a 9 month half day program offered through existing community action programs. Enrollment rose to 733,000. The responsibility of the program was under the federal Office of Economic Opportunity. In 1969, Head Start moved from the Office of Economic Opportunity to Office of Child Development. Enrollment declined to 663,600. In 1972, Head Start mandated to serve children with disabilities. Enrollment declined to 379,000. Between 1977 and 1984 the Head Start program began to expand. As the expansion grew so did the enrollment in the program. From 1990 to 1993, Head Start was promised full funding for the program which increased their enrollment and funding. (California Head Start Association, 2011a).

In 1998, the largest transition occurred. Head Start changed their purpose to the promotion of school readiness, more literacy focus for Head Start classrooms, full day-full year services for families, and various other changes. The Bush administration focused more on the accountability of teachers and in 2002 mandated national training institutes for the following

school year. The history continues to 2007 with little changes and a 1 percent cut in 2006 (California Head Start Association, 2011a).

The California Head Start program 2010-2011 statistics find 51% of their enrollments are 4 year olds, 72.9% were Hispanic or Latino, and 51% of the children's home language is Spanish compared to the 42.6% of children's home language of English (California Head Start Association, 2011b). Nationally, about one in four children younger than 5 is Latino (Torres, 2011). In California, Latinos represent more than half of all California children under age 5; however, only 48 percent of Latino children are enrolled in preschool.

Review of the Previous Literature

An Important Opportunity

The articles not only emphasize the importance of going to preschool but how to involve the parents in the process as well. Parent involvement is essential in the Hispanic community and it is the best way to earn their trust and get them to send their child to preschool. In preschool the young children learn many languages, social and practical skills in preschool that benefit them immediately and also enhance their chances for future achievement (Schwartz, 1996). The article emphasizes the importance of preschool for children who speak little to no English in that it gives them a bilingual education. However, Hispanic parents have been slow to overcome their historical reluctance to turn their young children over to non-family members for care (Shore, 2005). Nearly half of Hispanic mothers stay home to raise their children (Fuller as cited by Schwartz, 1996).

Parent Involvement and Strategies

One article stated that evidence has shown that increasing the amount of school involvement will not necessarily lead to such positive outcomes, especially for Hispanic families (Bauch as cited

by Espinosa, 1995). The article gives strategies for preschool teachers on how to involve the parents of Hispanic preschoolers as well as how to reach out to them. Parent involvement is important in recruiting preschool students. The article emphasizes using the parents' native language to communicate the benefits of preschool. By talking to the parents in their native language you foster a sense of trust as well as communication. It also recommends face to face contact and home visits (Schwartz, 1996). For Americans, education is top priority and we know the benefits of sending our children to preschool. However, some parents may not recognize this importance and instead of changing their minds it's better to emphasize the advantages of preschool that respond to the way parents actually think about child behavior (Zpeda & Espinosa as cited by Schwartz, 1996). The article also talks about how the Hispanic parents can help their child learn at home. The best way that these parents can help their child is through writing and story telling. The article states, "Students create stories based on their culture and experiences with words, and illustrate them by drawing and cutting and pasting pictures from magazines. For parents unaccustomed to reading to their children, this lesson provides a way to ease them into unfamiliar but important home learning activity"(Landerholm et al. as cited by Schwartz, 1996, p. 7).

Cultural Factors and Preschool Programs

Preschool can mean a wide range of different learning environments, ranging from an exploration type environment to an academic driven environment. "The term 'preschool' is used to define a wide variety of programs in centers for young children. Some have educational components that consist of just a few minutes a day of direct instruction in skills building of any kind" (Schwartz, 1996, p. 4). There are locally funded, private, and government funded preschools available for parents to choose from when putting their child in preschool. A cultural

factor for Hispanics is a belief in, “the absolute authority of the school and teachers” (Espinosa, 1995, p. 3). Many Hispanic families have strong family ties that believe in loyalty. This is represented by an “emphasis on warm, personalized styles of interaction, a relaxed sense of time and a need for an informal atmosphere for communication” (Espinosa, 1995, p. 3). The article emphasized the need for teachers to spend time researching particular values, beliefs and practices of the families in their communities (Espinosa, 1995).

Overall, these articles emphasize parent involvement and strategies that work with Hispanic families, the importance of attending preschool for those of Hispanic culture, and the cultural factors and preschool programs available for this population. The strength in this article is that even though these were written about ten years ago many of the parent involvement tips and cultural factors remain current. The weakness in these articles is it somewhat criticizes teachers in that teachers do not research the different cultures in their classroom and if they do not, it should a priority. Reviewing this in the present day, teachers are held to many expectations and I believe with time they do get to know each culture but it may not be right away.

Statistical Analysis

Nationally, about one in four children younger than 5 is Latino (Torres, 2011). In California, Latinos represent more than half of all California children under age 5; however, only 48 percent of Latino children are enrolled in preschool. In the article *California Study: Latino Preschool Rates Decline*, “Catherine Atkin, who heads California, called the results of this study troubling. She also says her group conducted a poll of Latino voters in the state and found that 83 percent believe it is very important for children to attend preschool before going to kindergarten” (Abbott, 2011, p.1). The statistics of the Latino population attending preschool have declined in

conjunction with the recession (2005-2009). Statistics predict that by 2050 one third of all Americans will be of Latino heritage.

Administrative Records

Union School 2010-2011 enrollment total was 9 students. Union School administrative records for 2010-2011 school year states that five students were classified as English learners and their native language was Spanish during this time period. Within Marin County there are 3,904 English learners. Union School has 1 teacher providing English Language Development (ELD) only instruction to the students. None of the students at the school were Fluent-English-Proficient.

Interview with an Expert

As part of my research for this topic, I interviewed a staff member of my school district, Susanne Hubble (pseudonym), Teacher/Principal, (personal communication, March 9, 2012) who started the Pre-Kindergarten program two years ago. Susanne's teaching career began in 1994 and she has taught preschool and elementary school. She received her Masters in Education in 2000. She came up with the idea of starting a Pre-Kindergarten program in 2010.

The focus topic of my interview was to learn Susanne Hubble's opinion about the importance of pre-kindergarten for ELL and the most effective ways to communicate with Hispanic families. Susanne described her training in pre-kindergarten as both formal and informal. She took early childhood education classes in college, attended early education workshops, and she also did a lot of babysitting when she was younger which she described as training as well and she also worked in a preschool her first few years in college. Susanne explains the advantages of a pre-kindergarten program as hoping to prepare the child for

kindergarten through learning alphabet letters and sounds which will make for a more successful kindergarten experience.

Susanne Hubble also expressed the most effective ways to communicate the importance of pre-kindergarten with the Hispanic families at her school. She states having informational nights in both English and Spanish, greeting them in the parking lot or classroom, sending flyers home in both English and Spanish, and having telephone hotline that's in Spanish where they could get some of their questions answered. She also believes that informal communication works best with the Hispanic population at her school. By giving parents a more personal approach they are more likely to attend informational nights, such as back to school night, school plays, and end of year programs.

The communication barriers seen in Susanne's school district include the material is not all in Spanish and English. Susanne has taken Spanish immersion classes and uses these skills to communicate with the parents. However, her academic Spanish compared to her conversational Spanish causes a barrier when she has to collect important information for the state. By not having information available in both Spanish and English communication barriers can arise. Susanne said the most effective ways to inform Hispanic parents about the pre-kindergarten program include talking to the parents in the parking lot and telling the brothers and sisters who currently attend the school about the program. The school community is so small that the best way to communicate the importance of the pre-kindergarten experience is through the brothers and sisters that attend the school who in turn tell their parents.

I concluded my interview with Susanna Hubble by asking what the next steps are in informing the Hispanic population of the importance of pre-kindergarten. The next steps Susanne sees for informing the Hispanic population of the importance of pre-kindergarten are to get as

many informed parents as possible by showing them the statistical information of a child who attended a pre-kindergarten and their success in kindergarten. Informing parents that the letters of the alphabet, the sounds of the alphabet, and the academics of kindergarten have changed since years ago and the expectations of a kindergartner have risen. She states that coming to kindergarten isn't just playing with play dough and singing songs but that the expectations have advanced in a way where the environment is more academic. Parents may not see this environment change and may not know that they need to prepare their child for this academic environment. She believes that this preparation should take place not only in Hispanic family homes but in every family home.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 9086.

Chapter 3 Method

Research Approach

The research involves using teacher action research, qualitative approach, and observing preschool children in a classroom setting.

Sample and Site

My research includes one interview with open-ended questions with Susanne Hubble, Teacher/Principal from an elementary school in a California School District. My research also includes observation of a student. One child was observed in language ability and social interaction. The child was born in the United States however; her family's origin is Mexico. They moved to California when her brother was 4 years old and have been living here for six years.

The family takes frequent trips to Mexico to visit family. The child lives with her mom, dad, brother, aunt and uncle. The family qualifies for free or reduced lunch through the school district. The family's home language is Spanish. While in a school setting the child is exposed to a monolingual English community. She is in the pre-kindergarten program at the same school as her brother. She attends the program three days a week. The school has a population of nine students ranging in age and grade, pre-kindergarten to sixth grade. The multi-grade environment allows the child to learn from others how to behave and function in a school setting. The family plans to move back to Mexico after she is done with kindergarten.

Data Gathering Strategies

My research gather strategies included writing notes, collecting student work, and teacher observations within the classroom.

Data Analysis

When analyzing the data I will examine the information to look for reoccurring themes. The themes I will be looking for include the strategies that worked for the ELL and the growth of the ELL academically as attributed to the English only school environment.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Sample and Site

The elementary school that was the subject of my research on is in a rural high-income community in California. The student statistics at this school for the 2011-2012 school year are 56% White and 45% Hispanic with 38% on reduced/free lunch. My observations focused on the pre-kindergarten program. There are only two students in the pre-kindergarten program whose ages are four and five years old. The school offers the pre-kindergarten program three days a week from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The pre-kindergarten program has a separate curriculum. The curriculum includes stories, alphabet practice, songs, and math concepts interwoven. The teacher implements these lessons three days a week focusing on alphabet letters and letter-sound recognition. During my time in the classroom, I have been able to observe the student's interaction during the curriculum and her social interaction with other students.

My research also includes an interview with the director of the pre-kindergarten program at the same school. My initial findings from this interview proved that informal communication through informational nights, flyers in English and Spanish, and meeting outside of the classroom works best when communicating the importance of pre-kindergarten with children of Hispanic families. She came up with the idea of having a pre-kindergarten program after realizing a program like that would benefit the incoming Hispanic kindergarteners as well as the teachers. The students get exposure and assistance they need for success in school and the pre-kindergarten teachers get students who have the basic skill necessary to keep up with the kindergarten requirements.

The final component of my research includes previous articles and research papers conducted on this topic. All the previous research provided in this paper describes methods on

how to communicate the importance of pre-kindergarten programs with the Hispanic population. I have found that although there are no current studies or statistics conducted that prove that informal communication works better than formal communication when providing the importance of pre-kindergarten to Hispanic families; observations and interviews have proven that the importance of pre-kindergarten are shown through the child's increased knowledge and the interviewees statements on how she communicates with the Hispanic families in her school.

Overall Findings

I began this research topic with an optimistic view that there were plenty of articles that would tell me exactly how to communicate the importance of pre-kindergarten to Hispanic families. This is my first year having an ELL student as a pre-kindergartener and if she did not come this year her skill level would present a problem when she would come the next year in kindergarten. The assumptions as to why Hispanic parents do not put their child in a pre-kindergarten program are numerous. After reading the articles, a reoccurring theme of Hispanic families not trusting people outside of their family to look after their children in a pre-kindergarten program was prominent.

The advantages of attending a pre-kindergarten program prior to kindergarten are seen in the observations I have made and anecdotal records I have reviewed at the rural school in California. The pre-kindergartner I observed was noted in September as only asking questions and speaking sentences in Spanish, in which the teacher would answer her question or rephrase her sentence in English. She was also noted as knowing the alphabet tune in which she knew some of the letters and guessed the others. She learned in September how to write numbers 1-5 with her teacher. By November she was using mostly English to communicate and was beginning to hear the difference between alphabet sounds. By March she learned to write her

name, spell her name, and is constantly working on a workbook, given to the family by the teacher, with the alphabet letters to practice writing and saying the name of each letter.

Reviewing this data presents the advantages of attending a pre-kindergarten program. In just six months the student went from speaking little to no English and transformed into a more fluent English speaker who recognizes alphabet letters, knows her name, and can write her name.

Communication is the key to expressing the importance of a pre-kindergarten program to Hispanic families. Solutions as to how to better communicate with these families includes face to face conversations, sending notes home in both English and Spanish, and teachers learning all they can about their students' cultures (Espinosa, 1995). After reviewing my research the main finding in my research and observations is that the most effective way to communicate the importance of a pre-kindergarten experience to Hispanic families is informally and the advantage of attending a pre-kindergarten program gives these students the foundation needed to meet the expectations of today's kindergarten programs. Incoming kindergarteners are expected to know many fundamental ideas in order to succeed in their first year of school. In order to give them a foundation to succeed all children must attend a pre-kindergarten program. A guideline that is available to both parents and educators on how to effectively communicate with parents of ELL and the importance of the pre-kindergarten experience would benefit all parties.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

Students that experience a pre-kindergarten program are much more academically and socially ready for kindergarten curriculum and environment. This program gives students, monolingual or bilingual, the ability to feel prepared and confident in what they will experience in kindergarten. The problem is not having students experiencing these programs. This leaves them at a disadvantage academically and socially. The implication is that these students will not be ready for kindergarten. Without any exposure to the academic side of school the teacher is left to start at ground zero with ELL who do not go to pre-kindergarten. Is pre-kindergarten essential in assisting ELL academically and socially? Can it bring these students success in kindergarten and throughout their academic pursuit?

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

The previous research included provides effective ways to communicate with parents of ELL and acknowledges the cultural aspect of this population. All the previous research focused on the cultural characteristics of respect and obedience for adult authority. The cultural characteristic of believing the school's job is to educate and the parent's job to nurture clashes with the American culture of a collaborative effort. In comparison to my observations and interview, the previous research concurs the effective ways to communicate with ELL parents and the importance of a pre-kindergarten experience in order to succeed in kindergarten. My observations and interview found that interacting with parents of ELL in an informal setting works best in expressing the importance of the pre-kindergarten experience.

Limitations/Gaps in the Study

One limitation in the study is that my observations and interview took place at a rural school that has only been running the pre-kindergarten program for two years. Another limitation in the study is that there are no written records of how successful a pre-kindergarten student does in kindergarten.

Implications for Future Research

This study encourages implications for future research. It would be beneficial to include observations and interviews from pre-kindergarten programs that have more experience. The next step would include research that follows ELL from pre-kindergarten into kindergarten. By following these students researchers can analyze the advantages or disadvantages of attending a pre-kindergarten program prior to entering kindergarten. Finally, it would also help by having interviews with ELL parents to view their beliefs on the school's responsibility and what they believe is the most effective communication tool.

Overall Significance of the Research

The overall significance of the research is to address the lack of effective strategies when communicating the importance of the pre-kindergarten experience for ELL to parents. Two main topics in regards to this communication effort include the cultural characteristics of the Hispanic community and the benefits of a pre-kindergarten experience for ELL. This study gives effective strategies to use when communicating with the Hispanic population. Based on observations, an interview and previous research these include informal meetings, providing information in both English and Spanish, and utilizing any existing family relationships.

Guidelines for Parents and Educators

Communication: Use informal methods to pass along information. This includes meeting parents in the parking lot to go over any paper material, sending information home in both English and Spanish, and utilizing existing family relationships (sons and daughters) to help explain information.

Understanding the Culture: It is beneficial to understand all you can about the different cultures that exist within the classroom. Learn how each culture views school and make an effort to be understanding towards their beliefs. Help these cultures better understand the school culture by providing bilingual information.

Pre-kindergarten to kindergarten: Take notes of any and all progress made by the pre-kindergarteners in your classroom. If the kindergarten classrooms are on site continue reviewing the student's progress to better understand what aided in his/hers success between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

Give them the Foundation: Provide the best possible learning environment for the child. Give the children a chance to practice kindergarten curriculum prior to entering kindergarten. Prepare them as best you can in collaboration with the child's parent(s) or guardian.

About the Author

My name is Martinique Perry. I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree and teaching credential as an undergraduate at Dominican University of California in 2009. I was lucky enough to find a special job in Petaluma as a teacher for kindergarten through second grade. This has been a unique experience for me as this is one of three little school houses in Petaluma, Little House on the Prairie style. I decided to go back to obtain my masters degree in 2010. I have struggled to

get through school but here I am days away from walking. I am currently engaged and planning my wedding while completing my thesis. I'm excited for the future and can't wait for May 11th.

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