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Preschool Experience vs. No Preschool Experience: Long Term Effects on Academic and Social Readiness of Children

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Preschool Experience vs. No Preschool Experience:
Long Term Effects on Academic and Social Readiness of Children

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Education

School of Education and Counseling Psychology

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

Despite federal and state investments in early education intervention programs, achievement gaps continue to afflict the education system with children from low-income families having an increased need for high quality preschool education. When children from underprivileged families move through the education system, the chances of academic success becomes difficult as the education gap increases year after year, and they fall farther behind. By the time these students enter high school, they are behind academically and unable to meet grade level requirements. Many of them to give up and quit attending school, leading to an increase in the dropout rate.

Research indicates that if high quality interventions are made during the preschool years, disadvantaged students are provided with benefits in language, literacy, social and academic skills. These skills, provided in the preschool years carry through into adolescence. The outcome for students is a successful educational experience, increasing high school graduation rates, and ultimately decreasing the dropout out rate in the community.

Families who cannot afford to pay for preschool have children entering kindergarten with privileged children who are already familiar with class structure, daily routines, socializing with peers, and who have experienced an introduction to academics. Children of low-income families have not had the chance to practice or participate in any of these experiences, and yet they are entering a program where the social and academic expectations are the same for both groups of students.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the benefits and the advantages of providing public preschool to families, who otherwise could not afford it. The long-term negative effects on children who did not have the opportunity to attend preschool are also described.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Access to a high-quality education is a civil and human right, regardless of race, color, or zip code. All children should begin with an equal introduction to academics, beginning with preschool. Unfortunately, this has not been proven to be the case. Access to high-quality preschool is particularly needed for low-income children who often start kindergarten behind their peers. Children from low-income families are often academically and socially behind their more advantaged peers. By the first grade, there is a full one-year reading gap between English language learners and native English speakers—a gap that increases to a two-year gap by the fifth-grade. The SSACA Strong Start for America’s Children Act (National Women’s Law Center, 2014) has helped decrease this gap by dramatically increasing access to high quality preschool for all 4-year olds whose families are below 200 percent of the poverty line. Leading economists agree that high-quality early learning programs can help level the playing field for children from lower-income families in vocabulary, and with social and emotional development, while helping students to stay on track and stay engaged in the early elementary grades. Children who attend free preschool programs offered to those who qualify are more likely to do well in school, find good jobs, and succeed in obtaining and building a career, compared to those children who do not take advantage of free early childhood intervention programs offered to the public.

Statement of Problem

The wide gap in children’s exposure and experience with academics and social settings of students entering kindergarten is the beginning of an ever-increasing gap in the education system. Disadvantaged students start off in the education system behind their more advantaged peers.

The majority of these disadvantaged children come from homes where they are unable to receive a high quality preschool education. It is not their ability that creates the education gap, but their lack of equal opportunity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this position paper is to inform the public of the impact on children, their families, the community and society as a whole if children do not receive the foundational education preschool provides for both academic and social skills. It is important for the public to understand the impact and importance in order to advocate for opportunities to include many children across the economic spectrum.

Research Question

What are the benefits of preschool education for children from low-income families? For the purposes of this paper, the term preschool education refers to formal early education experience for children ages three to five years old. The term low-income families refer to those families who are unable to afford the cost of sending their children to preschool.

Theoretical Rationale

Public preschool stems from the roots of the civil rights movement that lead to the access to education for children of color.

Civil Rights Movement, Brown vs. Board of Education,

...Civil Rights Revolution was a movement of the American people to remake the foundational legal framework of the nation. It resulted in statutes,

administrative regulations, and court rulings that worked toward the ends of justice, and it achieved justice by eliminating systematic, race-based humiliation of minority groups, as well as humiliation of persons marked by sex, national origin, and religious differences (Skrentny, 2014, p. 31).

From this revolutionary movement the foundation for equal education was built and has grown and developed over the years. It paved the way to allow for public education services for all people regardless of ethnic background and financial status. This movement happened in stages, first by providing for access to education by African Americans, then providing access to children with special needs. Added legislation at the federal level led to the creation of public programs, Free Appropriate Public Education (Skrentny, 2014). It no longer mattered if a child had special needs or came from a low-income family; they had the same rights to education as all other children. Without each of these movements arising and coming into action, children would not have this educational resource.

Assumptions

All children are allowed access to preschool and are given an equal start to succeed academically along with their peers. Not all families can afford to pay the added expense of preschool, and not all families who cannot afford the cost of preschool qualify for low-income preschool provided by the state. Only the children who reside in homes at or below federal poverty levels qualify for subsidized preschool programs. Therefore, not all children are able to attend preschool. Those children that are not able to acquire the preschool educational experience start out behind their peers and fall farther behind as the year's progress.

Another common assumption is that, all children who attend preschool start off with an equal education. Attending preschool alone does not provide an equal educational experience to all students who attend. The quality of the preschool itself plays a big part in the outcome of a child's preschool education. Some preschools provide high-end preschool curriculum taught by highly educated teachers, while other preschool facilities provide a more simplified daycare experience run by less experienced teachers. When preschoolers move onto kindergarten, the kindergarten teachers are faced with vast discrepancies among their students' academic abilities and social skills, and end up placing them in separate groups of ability. Placing kindergarteners into groups consisting of students with greater academic ability and social skills, from those students who lack academic and social skill education and experience, establishes the progression of the gap in the education system.

Summary

The information provided in this research serves to inform the reader of the importance of a child receiving a preschool education before entering kindergarten to enhance academic and social skills. The civil rights movement was the catalyst for removing barriers of people of color who had been denied access to job and educational opportunities. This movement led in turn to increasing access to many people including children with disabilities and children from low-income families.

The establishment of Head Start programs offered young children access to early childhood education prior to entering a formal kindergarten program. Head Start programs emphasized the academic and social skill development for young children prior to enrolling in a public elementary school program.

The importance of the quality of the public preschool program is examined. The long-term negative effects of children who either did not attend preschool or experienced a low quality program is reviewed, as well as the importance of the preschool experience is explored in the research literature in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

This section is an examination of the research literature on public preschools. Information was gathered from academic library searches using online resources. Research information is organized in the following categories: Importance of Preschool, Public Preschool and Early Intervention Programs, Importance of Learning Behavioral and Social Emotional Skills in Preschool, and Importance of Learning Behavioral and Social Emotional Skills in Preschool.

Throughout time SES has played a part in the unfairness for disadvantaged children. The history of education in regards to SES has shown that children born in poverty do not have an equal opportunity to education, compared to children who come from economically affluent families. From the very start, families that are in the high economic bracket are able to pay for quality preschool programs, while children from low-income families do not have the funds to pay for these expensive programs. A number of programs have been developed to try to eliminate the SES gap in education, but the problem still remains to exist.

Review of Academic Research

The Importance of Preschool

Why is an early education so important? Preschool is a place where young children can learn through active exploration in a safe place, learn how to build relationships with peers and adults, develop self help skills, absorb knowledge through play-based opportunities, and have support in learning how to solve problems. Academic, social and emotional skills that are

acquired in preschool stand as the building blocks throughout each individual child's educational experience. According to the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) the purpose of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is to allow for all children to have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. Our current version of ESEA is No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and it has failed in its attempt to provide an equal Opportunity To Learn (OTL). OTL means that all children have access to a high quality public preschool program, staffed with qualified teachers, in a safe healthy environment. NCLB has failed to address the needs of OTL, because public schools in low-economic communities are unable to obtain the school expenditures needed to provide equal services.

This is an unfortunate reality, when in fact public schools in communities of poverty actually need even more funds than public schools in affluent communities, to help pay for additional programs such as wraparound services. Wraparound services are an extended way to support students of poverty by providing additional programs before and after school that include mental services, medical care, subsidized meals, tutoring, family literacy classes, parenting skills classes, and adult mentoring programs. While these services are another added expense, they provide a better chance for the child and the family to succeed, and they play an integral part of the process in creating an opportunity for children in need to begin their education with an equal opportunity in the education system, meeting the necessary requirements to be school ready.

What does it truly mean for a child to be ready for school? The definition of school readiness can have different meanings to different people, but it often includes more than just academic readiness. Social, emotional, and behavioral skills are equally as important in being academically prepared to begin a formal education. In the past children were considered ready for kindergarten when they turned 5 years old. We now know that simply turning a certain age

does not mean a child will possess the skills needed to be ready to learn. “Early childhood educators have seemed at times to hold the view that the goal of the child is to be five, and have not looked systematically at the skills that underlie performing well in school at school entry and beyond” (Farren, 2011, p. 6). Attending a preschool program and the quality of that program is a greater factor in determining a child’s readiness for school than turning 5. The focus now should be on finding out what skills a child should have, at what level of performance would the skill be considered mastered before entering kindergarten, and what are the best ways to acquire those skills. Farren believes that, “The Early Childhood Education (ECE) field needs a better theory of change. A theory of change involves determining what kinds of experiences lead to what kinds of skills that would then lead to the desired outcome of success in school” (Farren, 2011, p. 6). Those skills that need to be acquired in order to be school ready do not only include academic, but social and emotional coping skills as well.

Controversy continues in the field about whether the problem in readiness is that children do not have discreet content skills that then must be explicitly taught before school entry or whether children need time to explore in a materials-rich environment to construct the knowledge they will later depend upon (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, as cited in Farren, 2011). Of the readiness skills for early learners, math instruction is often set aside to enable teachers to focus on literacy and language interventions. Long-term negative effects of receiving a poor introduction to language or not receiving one at all are documented in the research literature. Studies are needed on the long-term negative effects for children who do not receive a solid foundation in math skills, with an emphasis on how that affects children throughout their education experience.

Comprehension is difficult to measure in young children. Few standard measures of school readiness contain a valid measure of comprehension. Research has provided evidence of the negative long-term effects of missing preschool, leading educators to develop programs. One such program is called Head Start.

Public Preschool and Early Intervention Programs

Head Start is a well-developed and thorough program that focuses on the “whole child.” As a comprehensive program, Head Start provides physical, oral, and mental health services, and nutrition, as well as parenting, career, and educational assistance for families (Henry as cited in Wrobel, 2012, p. 74). It is the whole package, early education combined with extended wraparound services. Nonetheless, as public pre-school programming has steadily expanded, programs such as Head Start have to compete for enrollment. Instead of looking at this as a competition for acquiring new students, some new agencies have taken this opportunity to improve their service through interagency collaboration.

One case study examined the partnership between an urban school district and its local Head Start program. Historically, early childhood education, or preschool, has been the domain of private entities, nonprofit organizations, and grant funded programs such as Head Start. Head Start, which was created in 1964 as part of Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” is one of the longest running and recognizable early childhood programs aimed at low-income preschoolers and their families (Wrobel, 2012, p. 74). The program has endured many changes since 1964, but it still exists today. Currently 38 states have state-funded preschool programs. Enrollment for preschoolers has jumped from 14 percent of four-year-olds in 2002 to 25 percent in 2009 (Barnett as cited in Wrobel, 2012, p.75).

While Head Start is an important and much needed program there is still a need for other public preschool programs to fill the gaps missing in the Head Start program. There are a several problem areas in the program, one being the strict eligibility requirements. Head Start has been unsuccessful in reaching the target population, serving only about 40 percent of eligible children nationally (Wrobel, 2012, p. 77). Head Start can only serve the poorest students, leaving many low-income children behind. Second, Head Start programs tend to focus only on 4 year-olds, whereas alternative agencies can focus on the 3 and 5 year olds left out of the program. By keeping the door open for collaboration and referrals between Head Start and state funded preschool programs more children in a broader spectrum of ages are able to get the education they need.

For those students who do not fall into the age range to participate in Head Start, additional quality public programs are needed for children ages 3 and 5, as a result of the increased expectations that are now integrated into kindergarten. “Kindergartens in the United States now require children to learn content reserved for grades 1 and 2 in the past (Goldstein, as cited by Farren, 2011, p. 8). Children are now required to learn skills they were not previously expected to master until first or second grade. Most parents are unaware that these requirements are expected to be learned at such an early age, and may choose a preschool-daycare based on cost rather than their academic quality. Due to this increase level of skills that are to be mastered by kindergarten, teachers implement a rigorous direct instructional approach in preschool. This is extremely challenging for children who have difficulty controlling their behavior, energy level, and focus, common characteristics of children from high-risk families. Children who are unable to engage in such rigorous instruction at age 3 or 4 are often separated from the group, either by a time-out or sent out of the classroom, and they are not able to return until they are calm and

show they can listen and focus. In some cases these students do not calm down and their parents are called to come pick them up and take them home. Spending this time away from classroom instruction and group activities causes the child to miss out on educational information and learning experiences. This time spent out of the classroom causes these students to fall behind their more socially able peers. High quality early intervention programs are staffed with educated teachers who are able to identify children with special needs, and have the skills and knowledge to help all children remain in the classroom allowing for them to have to equal opportunity to learn and participate. In order for all children to acquire an equal opportunity from the start, not just any program will do. A high quality public program that covers all ages 3 to 5 is needed to provide an equal opportunity to receive a free and appropriate education.

Even with these programs, there are other areas that may cause a child to have an unfair disadvantage early in their academic experience. Children are often diagnosed as having a language delay. Nelson, Welsh, Trup, and Greenberg (2011), reviewed 336 four year olds attending 44 Head Start preschools in the US focusing on the prevalence of delayed language vs. normative language among impoverished preschool children. The families of the children involved in the case study all met the criteria required to enroll their child into the federally funded Head Start program. The program emphasis was on five skills that are important for school readiness, labeling one's emotions, basic mathematics, print knowledge, phonological elision, and phonological blending. The results of the study found that many of the children were living in poverty with clinically significant language delays, placing them in the strong to moderate language delay status. "A language delay in preschool children at ages 3–5 years can negatively impact learning in a broad variety of academic, emotional, and social domains" (Nelson, Welsh, Trup, & Greenberg, 2011, p. 165). Prior studies were reviewed that included

small samples of language-delayed preschool children followed longitudinally into adolescence. These studies concurred that preschool children with an early-delay in their language skills continued to have lower oral language skills in adolescence along with signs of deficiency in literacy and overall academic achievement. Children with language delays continue to experience difficulties, not only in areas concerned with language, but in many areas of academic development. Students who had difficulty recognizing emotions in social contexts also had difficulty learning academic subjects that were instructionally embedded in social interaction. The longitudinal outcomes displayed an ongoing connection; children at the preschool age with low language skills frequently have lower concurrent skills in cognitive and social-emotional domains, as well as later cognitive and academic achievement deficits at 7-18 years of age. “The risks for low language skills are higher for children in poverty than for their wealthier peers” (Nelson, Welsh, Trup, & Greenberg, 2011, p. 166). This study identifies that the lack of proper language skills is an area where children of poverty are more at risk than children of a higher SES. By providing public quality programs and wraparound services, children from low-income families who are diagnosed with problematic language skills may be identified early in their school experience.

Research has documented the long-term problems that may arise for children who are diagnosed with early language delays, leading to a need to develop programs to address this issue early in a child’s school experience. One enrichment program developed with a focus on early language skills is called the Early Reading First (ERF) program. ERF was created to address the concern that many of the nation’s children begin kindergarten without the necessary foundations for success in reading. The program was designed to address problems related to language and development among economically disadvantaged and language minority preschool children,

through quality classroom processes, professional development, and instruction (Gonzalez, Goetz, Hall, Payne, Taylor, Kim & McCormick, 2011, p. 253). The authors evaluated the helpfulness of the ERF program by comparing it with the performance of demographically similar children from the same school district who received practice-as-usual instruction. The program proved to be helpful in enhancing the acquisition of alphabet knowledge, print concepts, and by promoting vocabulary development.

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough just to attend a preschool. A child can have a completely different learning experience at one preschool compared to the experience of a child who attended a much different type of preschool. Preschools vary greatly in a number of categories: teacher to child ratio, academic curriculum, style of instruction, and educational background and experience of teachers. These elements are used in determining the quality of the facility.

Experts who have investigated quality early childhood development programs concur that such programs produce improvements that continue on into the higher levels of education. Benefits include assisting children in reaching a higher level of verbal, mathematical, and intellectual achievement, which in turn leads to a greater success in school. A greater success rate for these children tends to influence graduation rate, along with higher employment rates. It also reduces dependency on welfare, which results in lowering the crime rate and drug use in the community displaying the connection between children from at risk families and the effects on the community in which they live in (Lynch, as cited by Gonzalez, et al., 2011, p. 280).

Importance of Learning Behavioral and Social Emotional Skills in Preschool

Gormley, Phillips, Newmark, Weti, and Adelstein (2011) focused on high quality school based preschool programs in relation to enhanced social emotional development; the study

involved 2,832 kindergarten students in 2006. Previous studies provided evidence that young children's social-emotional development sets the stage for subsequent social-emotional functioning and plays a role in later academic achievement (Gormley, et al., 2011). It is important to focus on children's social and emotional skills as well as their academic abilities. Young children's social-emotional development includes a multitude of areas ranging from the ability to identify and understand one's own and others' feelings, establish and sustain relationships with both peers and adults, and regulate one's behavior, emotions, and thoughts (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, as cited by Gormley, et al., 2011). Research findings indicate that high-quality school based pre-K programs can support the development of some social emotional skills that enable children to enter kindergarten ready to learn (Gormley, et al., 2011).

Preschool can also help reduce delinquent behavior as teachers identify children with persistent problem behaviors before they enter elementary school. "As many as 10–25% of children aged 4–7 may exhibit behaviors such as aggression, noncompliance, or disruptiveness to the extent that the behavior interferes with their schooling" (Campbell, Webster-Stratton & Hammond, as cited in LeBel & Chafouleas, 2010, p. 25). Studies show that children who display persistent problem behaviors in preschool continue to have behavior issues that become more severe as the child continues onto high school. In fact expulsions from preschool classrooms have increased in recent years and are estimated to occur at a rate more than three times the rate in K–12 settings (Becker, Gilliam & Shabar, as cited by LeBel and Chafouleas, 2010, p. 25). The increase in expulsion rates in preschool sends a critical message regarding the importance of providing early behavior intervention support to effectively address current behavior issues and prevent more severe challenges in the future.

By identifying students with behavior problems between the ages of 3 and 4, early interventions can take place, and the earlier the intervention the better chance of improving the child's behavior skills and preventing them from getting worse. In order for early behavior intervention to have a better chance of succeeding, it will need to be assessed, identified, defined, and implemented by an educator who is familiar with proactive and effective behavior interventions.

Whether or not the preschool that a child attends offers these tools to intervention is another example of how the difference in the quality of care, services, and education a child receives can differ greatly. Success depends on the education and experience of the instructors working at the facility, and what services the facility offers. A teacher without adequate training may respond by providing less instruction and fewer instances of positive feedback causing the child's negative behaviors to increase instead of decrease. Whereas, a teacher who is educated on implementing effective class management techniques will help to identify students with persistent behavior problems early on, and will be able to provide to teach effective behavior management strategies.

There are several early behavior intervention programs available. One program, First Step to Success, a home-school intervention program for children at risk for antisocial patterns of behaviors. Another program designed to address early behavior intervention is The Incredible Years. This program is a training series that includes three comprehensive curricula for parents, teachers, and students. Second Step is a program that focuses on the prevention of aggression and promotion of social competence in children in preschool to Grade 9. Another program is Skill Streaming in Early Childhood, a comprehensive program that focuses on 6 different areas

involving social skills; beginning social skills, school-related skills, friendship-making skills, dealing with feelings, alternatives to aggression, and dealing with stress.

Along with these small and focused intervention programs is the School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Support Plan (SWPBIS) which provides a proactive systems-based approach to preventing and managing problem behavior in schools, that has been implemented in elementary and secondary school settings. SWPBIS has only been used for elementary and secondary school settings, but now it is being considered as a universal intervention tool with preschool as well. Currently, professionals are modifying the program to better serve the needs of preschool students. Without the opportunity to experience the benefits from such early intervention support programs, children miss out on an opportunity that can change the future of their education experience.

Bulotsky-Shearer, Fernandez, Dominiguez and Rouse (2011) examined the relationship between early problem behavior and preschool classrooms, with a focus on 4 year olds that were enrolled in a Head Start program located in an urban school district. Their analysis correlated with prior research that indicated early problem behavior in structured learning activities, often predicted lower academic outcomes in reading and math, as well as lower motivation, attention, and persistence in academically focused tasks. Along with problem behavior in academics, children demonstrate behavior with peers, a predictor of a child's lower attitude toward learning, difficulties self-regulating and ability to engage appropriately in socially mediated classroom-learning activities. Results of the study suggested that in order for classroom-based interventions to be effective, it is imperative that the program reaches children living in urban poverty areas and is implemented during early childhood education.

Preschool offers children a chance to learn and implement proper social skills. Children do not only learn how to behave from adults, but they also learn by watching and playing with other children. Attending preschool allows the opportunity for children to interact with large groups of children their age and observe and learn from them. Justice, Petscher, Schatschneider, and Mashburn (2011) focused on whether or not peer effects are present as early as preschool and, if present, how much of an impact do they have. Peer effects were assessed for 338 children in 49 schools over a period of one year. The results indicated that children with low language skills benefited from their high functioning peers. “The academic achievement of children and adolescents is positively associated with the skills and competencies of peers within their classrooms and their schools” (Thrupp, Lauder, & Robinson, as cited in Justice & Mashburn, 2011, p. 1768). The ways in which children learn from their peers is during student-to-student interactions, and through cooperative learning groups. This can be played out through either direct or indirect interaction between pairs. Direct interaction is when students communicate through cooperative learning groups or student-to-student interaction. An indirect influence from more advanced peers is when teachers implement high quality teaching methods to meet the needs of her more advanced students, but all students in the class benefit from this instruction.

Studies indicated a positive effect for low achieving students in learning from their advanced peers; however, there is a concern about how those higher achieving students fair from peer interaction with lower skilled peers. “This is called the “spillover effects” in which more highly skilled or capable students are negatively affected by the participation of less skilled or capable students in their classrooms” (Fletcher, as cited by Justice & Mashburn, 2011, p. 1768). A favorable result of one rigorous investigation of the so-called “spillover effect” suggested that

peer achievement showed little to no effect on the more highly skilled students (Hanushek et al., as cited by Justice & Mashburn, 2011, p. 1768). The result is that high-status students may not benefit from their peers, but they are not slowed down either. Low-status students only receive benefits by being surrounded by their skilled peers.

Even though the results of the study show positive effects for low-income students, there is little chance that they will benefit higher achieving peers, due to clustering students based on SES. The largest source of public subsidized preschool is Head Start and state-funded prekindergarten programs. Both programs prioritize the enrollment for low-SES children. Therefore, most of these children attend preschool with similarly low achieving peers. Findings from this study converge with results of recent quasi-experimental studies showing that low-SES preschoolers exhibited greater growth in language skills over an academic year when their classmates included both low and mid to high-SES peers versus only low-SES peers. Low-status children surrounded by relatively highly skilled peers had increased language skills compared to low-status children surrounded by peers with relatively low skill levels (Schechter & Bye, as cited by Justice & Mashburn, 2011, p. 1776). This indicates the importance of a high quality preschool program that serve students from all levels of socio-economic status.

Quality Preschool Programs

“By "high-quality," we mean a program for 3- and 4-year-olds that develops their knowledge and skills across the content areas: language and literacy, math, science, social studies, and the arts. A high-quality program also helps facilitate children's social, emotional, moral, and physical development, as well as helps shape their attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, and habits” (Barnett & Frede, 2010, para. 2).

If educators know that some preschool programs are better than others, what factors make one preschool program better than another, and how does a parent go about finding a high quality preschool program? Currently only three U.S. states include an assessment of the school along with an assessment of the child in regards to school readiness. Educators at individual schools need to establish the quality of their program and the level of their students' readiness for school use a High Scope Ready School Assessment (HSRSA) tool. A study by Williams, Landry, Anthony, Swank, and Crawford (2012) focused on presenting the public with a statewide system that would link information about kindergarten programs with children's school readiness scores to certify pre-kindergarten classrooms involving over 8,000 children from 1,255 pre-kindergarten classrooms in their research (Williams, Landry, Anthony, Swank & Crawford, 2012, p. 1). "One of the most important reasons for identifying effective programs is to provide parents with information that they can use to guide their decisions regarding selection of the best program for their child" (Williams, et al., 2012, p. 4). This information can provide parents with the necessary data to make a formal decision about which preschool program best fits their child's needs. Areas to consider when searching for a good preschool are; child-teacher ratio, class size, instructional strategies, teacher-child interactions, peer interactions, and the ecologies of the learning environment in which the facility presides in. Since the public is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of incorporating preschool in a child's educational experience, it is imperative to create a system that determines a child's school readiness after they have completed the program, and making this information public. Reporting data serves as a representation of the quality and performance of the program, thus allowing parents to make an informed decision.

Currently, a parent can look for a school that has been accredited by a national organization such as, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childcare Professionals (NAECP, 2008). “Both organizations conduct evaluations of childcare programs to determine if they meet a broad range of quality indicators that, in turn, result in accreditation” (Williams, et al., 2012, p. 3). However, other preschool programs may serve just as well as accredited programs but do not apply for accreditation because of the high costs involved. Only a small percentage of public preschools and Head Start programs seek accreditation by national organizations. As a result education leaders and policy makers are looking for alternative cost-effective approaches to document, whether early childhood programs are adequately preparing children for kindergarten (Williams, et al., 2012). At a future date, perhaps all preschool programs will be mandated to provide data that document the quality and outcome of their program.

Social Economic Status And Public Preschool

Achieving educational equity starts by recognizing that nothing is equal and everything is dynamic. Since inequality starts at or before birth, it can and should be corrected at or before birth with the resource of early childhood and parental education (Heckman 2011, p. 34).

“Investing early allows us to shape the future; investing later chains us to fixing the missed opportunities of the past” (Heckman, 2011, p. 35). He asks three questions:

1. When does inequality start?
2. Is it worthwhile to reduce inequality by investing in education?
3. How best to invest limited resources to create more productive human capital?

Heckman feels investing in the early years of disadvantaged children’s lives is a policy that promotes both equity and economic efficiency. His work focuses on providing disadvantaged

children with social and economic resources to equalize their opportunity to acquire an equal education. In his research he discovered, “Investment in early education for disadvantaged children from birth to age 5 helps reduce the achievement gap, reduce the need for special education, increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate, and reduce overall social costs” (Heckman, 2011, p. 32). Intact families invest more in their children than parents from single-parent homes, and investing more leads to higher student achievement. The reason why they invest more is unknown. Most parents agree that children would benefit if one parent was able to stay home and raise the children, but that is not an option for most middle class or working class families. By continuing to pay for early education, families endure higher social costs and suffer from a declining economic economy. Research often displays a connection from children of low-income families with poor quality parenting skills; this is not always the case. “An economically advantaged child exposed to low-quality parenting is more disadvantaged than an economically disadvantaged child exposed to high-quality parenting” (Heckman, 2011, p. 33). Most preschool programs include parenting advice, support, and information, which in turn will help increase parenting skills. By offering high quality early education programs at no cost, children will not only have the opportunity for an equal education, but parents will have the resources to improve their parenting skills.

The Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP) was designed to create an emotionally and behaviorally focused classroom-based intervention to support low-income preschoolers school readiness. Its rationale was based on past research that suggested young children who persistently exhibited dysregulation and disruptive behavior in the classroom were less engaged and less positive about their role as learners. The kinds of global self-regulatory skills connected to learning include, a children’s ability to sit quietly and to follow directions when asked to, as well

as the ability to focus attention on specific cognitively and behaviorally challenging tasks. The program focuses on teaching children self-regulation to better their opportunity to learn in a classroom. It was funded for a trial run and implemented in 35 Head Start classrooms.

The trial indicated that children enrolled in Head Start programs combined with the CSRP intervention, demonstrated significantly higher attention skills and greater impulse control as well as higher performance on emotional functioning tasks than did their control group counterparts (Raver, Jones, Li-Grinning, Zhai, Bub, & Pressler, 2011, p. 373). Another area of support in the program was its effort on working with the teachers. The program did not only focus on the students but also provided workshops and support for classroom instructors, to prevent teacher burn out. On the whole, their analysis suggests that teachers in treatment-assigned Head Start sites were successfully able to provide children with more well-managed and emotionally supportive classroom environments, than were teachers in the control group assigned Head Start sites (Raver et al., 2011).

Providing additional workshops and educational seminars to inform teachers how to manage students with social and emotional skills benefits the teachers, students, and their families. These teachers can provide simple tools and suggestions to the parents of these students, who might not know where to turn to for help with parenting skills. It has been found that children from low-income families not only enter school with a lower competence in basic academic skills, but they also show higher rates of externalizing behaviors and problems with attention, and these behavioral differences tend to increase throughout the school years (Alexander et al., 1993; Bodovski and Farkas, as cited by Bodovski & Youn, 2011). “In sum, our findings confirmed that students who began schooling with low math and reading skills are at greater risk of poor later Approaches to Learning, which in turn is a powerful determinant of

later student achievement” (Bodovski, & Youn 2011, p. 14). By identifying problem behaviors and difficulty expressing emotions early on in a child and addressing these needs, a child’s entire academic future can develop and continue down a positive path, that has a better chance of leading to success later in life.

Long Term Effects

“Children who enter school not yet ready to learn, whether because of academic or social and emotional deficits, continue to have difficulties later in life” (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, as cited by Farren 2011, p. 5). A longitudinal study examined the relationship between the behaviors exhibited by 1st grade students, and their achievement in reading and math in 5th grade. Included in the study were students from different social groups. The focus was not on SES or race, but on the connection between one’s intellectual capabilities and their social and emotional skills. “The findings reveal the complexity of the intertwined relationship between cognitive and behavior outcomes among young students and the long-term effects of early acquired skills and behaviors” (Bodovski, Youn, 2011, p. 15). The connection cannot be or defined with a single explanation, but is based on the overall outcome of an ongoing web, weaved of cognitive and behavioral connections and interactions over a long period of time. By observing children’s behavior in a classroom, one can identify the degree of difficulty they will experience in reaching academic success in school. “Young children’s early behavior is associated with later academic achievement. A substantial body of research has suggested that children who are more attentive to tasks, inhibit impulsive behavior, and relate appropriately to adults and peers, take greater advantage of learning opportunities in the classroom, thus more easily mastering reading and mathematics concepts” (Bodovski & Youn, 2011, p. 4). These are

skills that are introduced and taught to children throughout their preschool experience. They are taught to focus on both gross motor activities and fine motor skills, such as playing a physical education game with the whole class, or working on fine motor skills by completing a puzzle individually. Through class rules and routines along with regular reminders to slow down and take turns, preschool students have a better chance of inhibiting their impulse behavior.

Preschool lays down the path for a child's future academic achievement in school by providing and instilling the early skills students need to be successful in school.

Summary

Preschool is a significant and valuable educational resource, a personally held assumption that was substantiated in the research literature. What became apparent throughout my research was the importance of the quality of the preschool program. High quality programs produced greater results not only with academic instruction, but also by incorporating and demonstrating proper social skills when interacting with adults and peers.

The educational gap from those students who start off behind in school increases with each school year, a gap that leads to negative effects as children continue their school career. By missing the opportunity to implement early interventions to children with low academic skills, social, emotional, and behavioral issues, often discovered in early education programs, educators are unable to prevent the behavior from becoming more severe with each passing year. For a majority of these children their emotional and or behavioral issues prevent them from completing high school and they drop out of school. They have a difficult time finding jobs in the community and will turn to alternative ways to get money, food, transportation, electronics, and so on. In turn, this may lead to an increase in crime rates. Investing in these children early on,

through early education and intervention programs, could lead them to increased opportunities for success.

Chapter 3 Method

Research Approach

The research approach included reviewing information from previous case studies and research projects in regards to the importance of public preschool focusing on academic readiness and social skills for low income families. Also, the teacher/researcher and compared findings from the literature to the information and observations on students currently enrolled in a specialized school setting. I work at a school designated for students who are not able to receive their education through the public school system due to extreme social, emotional, and behavioral issues that impede their ability to learn in a regular general education classroom.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to the ethical standards for protection of human subjects of the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally a research proposal was submitted and reviewed by my advisor.

Chapter 4 Classroom Observations

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The population reviewed included 10 students covering all grades kindergarten to fourth grade, with students ranging in ages 5 to 10. All students qualify for special education services and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Of the 14 different diagnosis that qualify a student for special education services, 4 students have been diagnosed as having an Other Health Impairment (OHI), 5 fall under the category of Emotionally Disturbed (ED), and one was diagnosed with autism. 1 student is in kindergartener, 2 in second grade, 4 in third grade, and 3 in fourth grade. They are all males. Under the category of race, 6 are Caucasian, 2 African American, and 2 of Hispanic race. In regards to home placement, 2 students live with both parents, 1 was adopted, 2 live in a group home, and 5 live in a single parent home. Services that they receive; 1 student that receives 60 minutes of occupational therapy, 2 receive speech and language services, 6 receive counseling services, 2 receive extended behavior intervention services, and 1 receives services from a an in-home wraparound program. Transpiration is provided as well to those who want it, 7 students take the bus to and from school, 2 are transported by cab, and only 1 is driven to and from school by a parent.

Student information was from their parents, guardians, IEP files, reports from previous counselors, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, and notes from previous teachers, along with school records and reports from their school file.

Teacher Observations

Last year was my first year working as a teacher. I was able to complete two long term teaching positions and work as a substitute teacher in five different school districts. The districts I worked at included schools in both low-income communities and in high-income communities. I am currently teaching at a small private school that is designed for children with significant behavioral and emotional issues. When a school district has used all of its resources to help a student remain in a general education classroom, and all resources have failed, then the district recommends that the student attend a school that can better suit their needs such as our school. The students that enroll in our school have all been referred from their home school district. The school district representatives advise parents that attending a specialized school is the least restricted environment for their child.

Over the past seven months I have learned about the importance of proper social skills in obtaining an education, and how hard it is for children who are emotionally disturbed to get through the day. Everyday is hard and full of challenges. On a daily basis, students throw chairs, turn over desks, fling water bottles across the room, and destroy papers and books. Children are screaming and yelling in fits of rage and anger, restraints on students are implemented. They threaten staff and peers, along with spitting, biting and hitting staff and other students. Throughout all of this I am expected to teach all common core curriculum for all grades K-4 in one room. At first I asked myself, "How did I get here?", then I asked, "How did these children get here? What happened to them that brought them to this point in their lives?".

What brought these children to a state of emotional instability cannot fall upon one single thing, but an accumulation of situations, events and inborn illnesses that are more likely to have contributed to their current state. Yet, I have to wonder, if these children received an early

education from a high-quality preschool program could it have changed their fate? If children with special needs were identified in early education programs, would it have made a difference? I believe the answer would be, yes to both questions.

One student is currently living in a group home. He was removed from his home, where he lived with his older brother and mother for several reasons. His mother did not send him to school. She was addicted to drugs and was often in an incoherent state that prevented her from driving her son to school. When the child first came to our school he could not comprehend a daily schedule, class rules and routines, and school protocol. He rarely did any academic work and he had no desire to learn to read or write. He did not want to stay in class and would leave campus constantly. He would fall asleep in class for one to two hours a day. He learned to present himself as a tough, strong willed kid that no one could tell what to do, and he was only 6 years old. With time and through constant reminders, incentives, positive praise, and rewards, he has made progress and has come a long way, but is still working well below grade level.

Children who are diagnosed with special needs or as emotionally disturbed are more often males than females. The total enrollment in the class consisted of all males, except for a brief period when a second grade girl was part of the group. She came from a broken family, split by domestic violence. The father spent some time in jail as a result of legal action against him. She did not attend preschool and had a difficult time following a daily routine. When I would ask the students to return to their desks and begin teaching a lesson plan, she would constantly talk throughout the lesson with comments such as, 'I don't have to do what you say,' and 'you're not the boss of me,' and make tapping noises with her pencil on the metal legs of her desk until she drove one of the other students to leave the classroom screaming and shouting in frustration. Only then would she stop making noise, with a big smile on her face. She also had a

difficult time with the concept of sitting at a desk. She did not understand why she had to sit at a desk for long periods of time and would stand up and walk around the classroom talking and playing constantly.

It was not long before it became apparent that she would not be able to attend a regular school, even our private school could not meet her needs. Her father pulled her out of her placement at our facility and placed her in an individualized teaching program based on Scientology.

Another student in my class receives wraparound services. It was my first time being a part of one of their programs. The program in particular was called SENECA, which is a family of agencies that provide unconditional care. They provide intensive and preventive treatment for at-risk children and their families. SENECA arranged monthly meetings that included staff from school, people living in the home and counselors working with the family and a designated mentor that works one-on-one with the child. They helped the family become organized by developing a daily routine that worked for them. They provided a reward chart for the parents to use with their son that included taking him for ice cream or to the park when he had a good week at school. The mother went back to work and the boy was performing much better in school. The incentive was chosen because he loved to go to the park with his step-dad and little brother, so he tried really hard to be good at school in order to be able to spend the weekend at the park for quality family time. Everything seemed to be improving and going well. The mom was holding down her job, the parents were communicating better with help from regular couples counseling and their parenting skills were improving from the information they received at parenting skills workshops. While the improvement with the boy and his family took a few months to obtain, the decline of it all falling apart, seemed to happen over night.

Unfortunately, it is the policy of the agency to remove their services they provide for a family after a certain period of time; in this case it was six months. Soon after SENECA was no longer providing services for the family, the mother lost her job and returned to taking drugs. She stopped bringing her son to school on time, causing him to arrive late in the morning, often missing first period language arts. When he arrives at school late every day, he becomes very frustrated, angry, and sad, and he has begun to revert to previous negative behaviors of being a constant interruption in the classroom and leaving the campus without permission. He demonstrates behavior that appears as though he has given up on himself and feels that no one supports him or believes in him. He makes negative comments about himself including committing suicide to get away from it all. Observing a wraparound service provide a family support and seeing the improvements, then seeing it be taken away too soon and watching the family fall apart again, has opened my eyes to just how important and helpful these wraparound services can be, and what an impact the positive effects and changes can have on a child and his family.

Working at this school has provided me with an education that can only be obtained through experience. I have also learned that it is important for children to receive an education early. There are long-term challenges that develop from a missed opportunity of an early education program. At first it all seemed too overwhelming and I wanted to leave the school and find a job working somewhere else. When I saw how much growth my students are making and how much they need someone to believe in them, praise them, understand them, support them, and most of all give them a sense of stability, my desire to leave was overcome by a reassuring feeling that I was hired to work at this facility because this is where I was meant to be.

Themes

A significant finding, following review of data from the literature and from student observation was poor parenting skills. Issues ranging from drug addiction, incarceration, domestic violence, and child neglect were apparent in each child's case, in one form or another. While research has connected an increase in poor parenting skills with low social economic status, it does not mean it is always the case, but there is definitely a correlation between the findings of this research and the cases of my students. Poor judgment in parenting can be connected with parents not sending their child to preschool because they are not aware of the significant educational value of attending an early educational program. This is where wraparound services can be of significant value in educating parents and providing services to those families in need.

SES is another common reason why my students either did not attend preschool or went to schools that were low-quality facilities. A single parent status is one reason why parents fall into a low SES. Most of my students are from single parent homes. Many of the parents students do not have outside family to help care for their children, causing the financial burden to fall on one parent without support from extended family or the absentee parent.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

The research on the importance of preschool and the negative long-term effects for children who do not attend, indicated that being emotionally, behaviorally, and socially ready for school is equally as important as being academically ready, if not more so. The ability to follow class rules and procedures, and communicate and socialize well with others, are skills a child should possess before the process of learning academics begins. Research implied that simply instilling the academic skills a child should have mastered before entering kindergarten is not enough to ensure success. Social, emotional and behavioral skills need to be mastered as well, in order for a child to be successful in school. As to what is the best way to teach those skills, through an explicit teacher directed format, or through a hands on materials-rich environment, is still a controversial issue.

Several types of preschool facilities and early intervention programs all strive to teach both academic and social skills to students from low-income families. The most well-known and widely used public program is Head Start. However, Head Start places a majority of its focus on 4 year olds, so there is still a high demand for programs to tend to the needs of 3 and 5 year olds.

The need for wraparound services is helpful in informing and educating parents of low-income children and helping to keep these families intact. These services can also identify early learning disabilities, such as a speech and language deficiency, or behavior and emotional problems. By diagnosing and receiving the proper service for the issue in question early on, whether it be the need for a speech and language pathologist, or an occupational therapist, or

counseling, having an early diagnosis can change the course of the child's long term academic experience.

In summary, all research provides evidence of long-term positive effects of receiving an early education has on a child both academically and socially, has brought about a positive response from government agencies. More early intervention programs are being developed, and new and improved facilities are being made available to families of low-income status. It is not a fix all, but it is a step in the right direction.

Comparison of Classroom Observations to the Literature

The most significant connection between the review of the literature and the observations of my students is the connection between poor parenting skills and families of low-income status or poverty. Parents of low SES in general, do not have the knowledge or access to the resources and information that families of a higher SES have access to, in regards to parenting skills and the value of a child's education. When the parents of students were informed of resources outside of the classroom that they had access to, they were unaware the services existed and that they could take part in them at no cost. Services range from the Big Brother, Big Sister programs to free parenting workshops offered in the community.

Another area of study included the high level of suspensions and expulsion rate for students who are unable to follow school rules and procedures and present poor social skills. Every one of my students has had a parent or guardian called to come pick their child up from school early and on more than one occasion. Most of my students have had one or more suspensions. If they had been exposed to a strict universal behavior plan in preschool, then maybe their behavior would not have escalated to the point of receiving a suspension. The

School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Support Plan (SWPBIS), which provides a proactive systems-based approach to preventing and managing problem behavior in schools, has only been used for elementary and secondary school settings, but now the program is having accommodations made so that it can be used with preschool students. This may serve as a much needed tool to help children in early education acquire appropriate behavior skills before they enter into kindergarten.

Limitations/Gaps in the Research

There are a few limitations from my observations, the most significant being that all the students in the study have been diagnosed with a disability and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). In addition to being diagnosed as having special needs, most of the students have been diagnosed as being emotionally disturbed. It cannot be determined if their lack of proper social skills and inability to follow class rules, routines, and directions, is caused by their illness, or does their diagnosis of being emotionally disturbed stem from their lack of these skills and display of severe behavior that becomes increasingly worse with time. How much of a part the diagnosis plays in the results is unknown.

Two other significant limitations were that all of my students were male and the study pool included a small selection of students. There was one female student I taught for less than two months, other than that all 10 children in my classroom observations were male. I would have preferred to observe 10 male and 10 female students. This would have provided information on both genders and increased the group size for my observation study.

Implications for Future Research

Past research has placed its focus on social skills and language skills providing a significant amount of information in this area, but more studies need to take place focusing on the long-term negative effects for students who do not receive a solid foundation in math skills. Math is an equally important subject and doing more longitudinal studies on this subject would provide information to the public of what the long term affects would be throughout a child's education if they did not receive the foundational math skills obtained in preschool.

Research is needed on the significance of wraparound services. I have observed the positive outcome of these services, but also observed the negative effects on a family when the services are removed from the home. Are these services doing more harm than good? Do they serve as a temporary band-aid, or is the outcome more positive than not? A comparison study that focuses on children who attend preschool with wraparound services versus children who attend preschool without being provided with any outside services is an important next step.

There are currently three states that provide a statewide system that obtains information on a student's school readiness scores to determine the quality of the preschool program. More studies should be conducted comparing preschools that have been certified by the state and compare them to scores of students from other preschool programs. If the scores were significantly high for the credited preschool programs, such information may inform the public of the value in sending their child to one of these programs. If the scores did not vary greatly compared with other preschool programs then parents would not feel the need to spend money to send their child to a certified preschool program.

Overall Significance of the Study

The significance of this thesis study is to inform the public of previous case studies and research projects that provide concrete evidence of the positive value of an early childhood education. The information in this paper confirms that when high quality interventions are made during the preschool years, the early interventions are able to prevent a child from starting their educational experience behind their more able peers. The ability to identify, diagnose, and provide necessary interventions early on, prevents students from falling farther behind with each consecutive grade level, as studies discussed in this paper have shown. These early interventions are in place because teachers and professionals are able to observe and work with young children in preschool. By not attending preschool facilities, children are missing out on the opportunity to have an early diagnosis of any issues that may interfere with their educational experience.

The research has also brought to light gaps in the well-known government program called Head Start. Many people believe that Head Start is the answer to providing public preschool to low-income families. Head Start focuses mostly on 4 year olds, while preschool covers ages 3-5. This leaves out two important age groups of children. Another fault with the Head Start program is its strict eligibility requirements. Head Start can only serve the poorest students, leaving many low-income children behind. The cost of an average preschool can be several hundred dollars a month and most low-income families cannot afford the added expense, yet their income is too high to qualify for the Head Start program. Future programs need to be developed that provide public preschool to a broader range of low-income families.

About the Author

Dionne Estes was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, working at home as a single mother caring for two sons until the older son entered high school. Once the oldest was in high school she returned to college as an adult beginning her education at the local community college, where she completed her general education requirements. She then transferred to Dominican University of California and received a bachelor's degree in Humanities with a minor in Cultural Studies. She continued her education by enrolling in the dual teaching credential program consisting of a general education credential and a special education credential. After completing the credential program she took a year off school to focus on finding a job and spending time with her daughter, who was born in the middle of her two-year credential program. She returned to the university and enrolled in the master's program focusing on education. She currently lives locally, raising her three children and working as a special education teacher.

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