

A Model for Using Service-Learning in Teacher Education Programs

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The purpose of this study is to develop a service-learning model that increases preservice teachers' knowledge about communities by assisting preschool programs to provide expanded services to low-income families. The researcher interviewed key stakeholders in three preschool programs that vary in the types of family support services and use of preservice teachers as interns about their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the families at their centers. Their interview responses were used to develop a service-learning model that will help improve delivery of program services and increase students' knowledge about how to provide comprehensive support for children, families, and communities.

Keywords: service-learning, teacher education, early childhood education, preschool

Background

High Quality Preschool Programs

Several studies have shown that children who are in a quality childcare program or preschool are more likely to arrive at school ready to succeed in school (Barnett, 1995; Nelson, 2006; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Research has shown that one indicator of program quality is the level of attentiveness from the teacher which is affected by teacher-child ratios. Programs with low-ratios, meaning more teachers and assistants in the classroom have higher-quality ratings (Frede, 1995). Therefore, increasing the number of adults in the classroom can have a positive impact on program quality. Programs can use parent volunteers or university interns to increase the number of adults in the program. This study will examine how university interns impact the quality of care.

In addition, there are measurable long-term benefits of attending high-quality preschool programs on academic achievement, social behaviors, and employment. For every dollar that is used to provide preschool programs, three dollars are saved by not having to provide funds to pay for remedial education services for low achieving, children and other social services for citizens that are unemployed. Working citizens also pay taxes and increase revenues for the community (Bartik, 2011). The long-term goal of preschool is to provide a foundation of success that leads to more productive citizens. However, some preschool programs also provide family support services to help parents develop skills to find employment and increase the effectiveness of their parenting. These programs have been successful in meeting their goals of reducing unemployment rates and

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increasing students' performance in school (Love, Kisker, & Ross, 2002).

Comprehensive Support Services for Families

Programs vary in how they provide these services to parents. Some programs refer parents to a community resource guide or organization that will help them with a particular problem. This information is shared in weekly newsletters, face-to-face, at school events and posted on parent information bulletin boards. Some studies have noted that this informal exchange of information is a model that may work better in middle-class, suburban schools where the cultural norm is to initiate contact with the teachers to address concerns and solve problems. In low-income urban programs families may not feel comfortable sharing personal concerns with teachers and may not use them as a resource to help with family problems (Watson, 2011). Therefore, some programs have developed other models for supporting parents that build trust and community within the school. Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) studied a parent leadership program that was developed in a low-income urban school. The program was designed to teach parents leadership skills, so they could advocate individually and collectively on behalf of their children's educational needs. A community organizer facilitated the group meetings where parents discussed concerns about the school programs, developed plans to share the concerns and possible solutions with the school staff. The participants in the program learn to trust the facilitator and the group members. They engaged in activities that allow them to practice how to speak with public officials and school staff individually and collectively. Most importantly, they learned how to gain access to information networks and use the information to improve educational outcomes for their children and themselves, as they completed college degrees and pursued employment training.

Clearly, improving the quality of preschool programs and expanding the services they can provide is a worthwhile investment for communities. While school staff agree that this is an important goal, they need more support and resources to provide the services (Watson, 2011). Local universities can provide support and resources through service-learning projects.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is defined as a method to address community problems by systematically engaging in service activities that apply the content from a university course (Anderson, 1998). In teacher education programs, the service projects focus on improving schools for children and their families.

It is intended to provide preservice teachers with more field-experiences that will help them understand how children's home and community lives influence their behavior in school. They also gain hands-on practice with solving social problems and teaching their students about social responsibility and activism (Freeman & King, 2001). Preservice teachers integrate the experience into their identity as teachers by engaging in reflection about the process.

Service-learning is one of many examples of experiential learning techniques that allow students to apply what they have learned (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine, & Rude, 1998). Instructors can prepare students for service-learning experiences in other courses with simulated experiences, and role-playing where students are given case study information about a certain population and then are given a problem-solving task to work on using that information. Classroom observations and short tutoring assignments can also be used to help students understand the culture of the students. Finally, some programs pair service-learning with internships. Students are required to journal about their service-learning projects and or videotape themselves in their internship. Then, they answer a series of questions about their projects and teaching that help them critique and improve

their performance (Wade, 1997).

Successful service-learning projects follow a similar process of identifying the organization or program to work with; meeting with the stakeholders to identify the goals of the project; creating a contract that outlines each person's responsibility; and completing an evaluation that explains how meeting the project goals impacted the stakeholders and any changes that need to be made in the future to sustain or improve the project (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine, & Rude, 1998).

Some service-learning projects involve students in direct experiences with children and families, such as volunteering at a homeless shelter, preschool, or nursing home. Some projects focus on gathering resources to share with families, such as hosting a clothing drive, food drive, fundraiser, or information night for families. Other projects focus on changing policies that will improve the lives of families, such as advocating for funding and for social and educational services in the state budget (Freeman & King, 2001; Freeman & Knopf, 2007; Freeman & Swick, 2003; Seitz, 2005).

Programs benefit from the projects by having more people on hand to design, develop, and implement projects that support families. Teachers can assign student projects to lead or use the students to do things in the classroom that allow teachers to do projects outside the classroom and meet with families (Briody, 2005).

Children and families receive more individualized attention from program staff to successfully resolve problems and issues. Interacting one-on-one allows staff to understand the needs of the families and build authentic relationships based on mutual trust (Brown, 1998).

Students learn how to work with families, engage in civic actions and model civic responsibility for their students. Students who have participated in service-learning projects have reported that they have a better understanding of social issues and different cultures. They also gain organizational, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Daniels, Patterson, & Dunston, 2010).

The current study will examine how preservice teachers assisted high-quality preschool programs to provide expanded services to low-income families. The researcher studied three programs that varied in the types of support services they provide for families and a number of university interns (preservice teachers) in the program to determine the effect these programs have on educational and employment outcomes for children and families.

Method

Subjects

Fifteen teachers and directors at three preschool programs that vary in geographic location, level of family support services, and number of interns were interviewed for the study. The preschool programs in this study serve families that qualify for childcare subsidies from the DHS (Department of Human Services) and participated in the QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) project in Kalamazoo County. Thus, each program had teachers that wanted to provide more social support and educational services to the families in their programs.

Procedure

Each staff member participated in a 60-minute interview about their perceptions of the WMU (Western Michigan University's) internship program, families' experiences with the program services, overall level of student performance and program quality.

Instrumentation

The interview consisted of 16 questions that prompted staff to share perceptions of the WMU internship program, families' experiences with the program services, overall level of student performance, and program quality (see the participatory evaluation interview in Appendixes 1 and 2).

Design

This program evaluation used a participatory model. The staff were guided through a self-study approach to evaluate the success and shortcomings of the components of their programs based on their perceptions of the educational and employment outcomes for their programs. Each program was evaluated individually and not compared to other programs.

Analysis

The researcher studied the notes from the interviews and labeled all program activities mentioned by the staff as a quality improvement activity or a parent program activity. The next step was to tally the number of professional development and parent program activities for each center. The centers were classified as having a high amount of activity, if they had three or more activities in the professional development or parent program activity category and low if they had two or less, activities in those categories. The results for each center are in the Table 1.

Table 1

Amount of Program Quality Improvement and Parent Program Activities

Program	Quality improvement activities	Parent program activities
A	High	High
B	High	Low
C	Low	High

Results

Program A had a high amount of quality improvement activities. It was involved in a local QRIS project that required that each teacher write a quality improvement plan and be assessed to determine if the implementing the plan increased quality over a one-year period. The program also was preparing for their re-accreditation visit by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The teachers were adapting a new literacy program and participated in intensive coaching with Early Reading First staff. They also requested early childhood education interns from the university to provide more individualized instruction to the children in the program.

Program A was part of a larger non-profit organization that served homeless families and families that have been victims of domestic violence. Therefore, their mission is to serve families in need. As a result, their parent program activities were high. They implemented "Parents as teachers", a parenting skills program. They provided free tuition for homeless families and employment assistance through a program called "Grow to learn". They had a parent advisory group that gave input on center policies and programs. They also offered parent training through monthly parent meetings.

Program B also had a high level of quality investment activities. Like Program A, they participated in QRIS and Early Reading First and requested interns from the university to improve delivery of instruction. In addition, they set a goal to have all staff get their Child Development Associate credentials and were supporting

each other in achieving that goal.

The only parent support activity Program B offered was providing parents information about community services when requested. Therefore, Program B was rated as having a low amount of parent program activities.

Program C had low amount of quality improvement activities. They were only involved in the QRIS and Early Reading First program.

Program C was a church-based childcare center. The church offered many services to church members and the neighborhood. Families at the center were invited to participate in job training programs, career fairs, and two long-term parenting support groups. Program C reported that all families at the center had at least one-parent that was fully employed.

Conclusions

The program that used interns and was linked to a larger service organization was most effective and providing a high-quality preschool program and parent support services. A significant amount of the children in the program are living in poverty and the center has been able to obtain additional resources to meet their needs.

All three programs serve low-income families and could benefit from having students participate in service-learning projects. Program B could have students focus on projects that increase parental involvement, such as organizing parent meetings and information fairs. They could also work in the classroom with the children while the teacher makes home visits or meets with parents.

Program C could have students in the classroom to provide more individualized instruction and develop curriculum materials that would improve program quality. Students could also provide teachers with more time to pursue additional training and national program accreditation.

All programs expressed interest in working more with students. The two centers that had interns shared that the interns had a positive impact on the program quality. The students have rated their internship experiences at the centers positively and shared that they learned an enormous amount of information about cultural diversity and supporting families.

The next step is to develop a service-learning project with local childcare programs that would focus on providing support services for families. This would be for students in the young children, their families, and society course. The preschool internship would continue to focus on improving program quality.

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Appendix 1: Participatory Evaluation Interview

Participatory Evaluation Interview

Defining Outcomes

As part of the QRIS your program was assessed and rated as a (provide the star rating and definition of star level). Is this the rating you expected for your program? Why?

What other measures would you use to define quality for your program? How would you rate your program on those measures?

Your program uses the OWL curriculum. The Early Reading First coaches assessed your students' progress in literacy to measure the impact of the curriculum and their program. About what percentage of your student performed at the level of "meeting expectations?" Are these results what you expected? Why?

What other measures do you use to assess your students' performance? What percentage of your students is "meeting expectations" on those measures?

In this economy, particularly in Michigan, many families have a parent who is looking for work. What percentage of the families in your class has a parent that is looking for work? Does this percentage seem low, average, or high to you? What types of concerns do these families share about their job searches? What types of concerns do these families share about their economic situation?

WMU Interns

The WMU internship program is a partnership that was designed to benefit the childcare center and WMU. The benefit for WMU is having a field practicum site and qualified mentors for its students. The benefit for the childcare center is having additional support in the classroom to provide individualized instruction to young children. How many WMU interns have you had in your classroom?

Describe the strengths and shortcomings of the WMU intern program.

What impact have interns had on children's educational outcomes?

What impact have interns had on the quality of the childcare program?

Family Programs

List all the programs your center offers families.

- What are the goals and functions of each program?
- Describe the strengths and shortcoming of each program.
- What percentage of families in your classroom consistently participates in at least 1 program? Is this level of participation what you expect? Why?
- What impact have the family programs had on families' employment outcomes?
- What impact have the family programs had on children's educational outcomes?
- Is there anything else you want to share about your program or the families?

Appendix 2

Participatory Evaluation Interview Coding Sheet			
QRIS program quality outcome	Below average	Average	Above average
Agreement with rating level	No	Maybe	Yes
Other program quality outcomes	None	1-2	More than 3
Other program quality rating level	Below average	Average	Above average
OWL assessment ratings	Few	Some	Most
Agreement with OWL assessment ratings	No	Maybe	Yes
Other child assessments	None	1-3	More than 4
Other child assessments rating level	Few	Some	Most
Percentage of parents looking for work	Few	Some	Most
Perception of the percentage	No	Maybe	Yes
Number of family concerns about looking for work	None	1-3	More than 4
Number of family concerns about economic situation	None	1-3	More than 4
Number of WMU interns	None	1-3	More than 4
Number of strengths of internship program	None	1-3	More than 4
Number of shortcomings of internship program	None	1-3	More than 4
Impact of interns on program quality	None	Moderate	Significant
Impact of interns on children's educational outcomes	None	Moderate	Significant
Number family programs	None	1-2	More than 3
Number of strengths of family programs	None	1-3	More than 4
Number of shortcomings of family programs	None	1-3	More than 4
Number of family's that participate	Few	Some	Most
Expectation of family participation level	No	Maybe	Yes
Impact of family program on families' employment outcomes	None	Moderate	Significant
Impact of family programs on children's educational outcomes	None	Moderate	Significant