Early Childhood Education: The Promise, The Challenges

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Abstract

The benefits of high quality early childhood programs have been documented. Good programs engage students in developmentally appropriate practices that include pre-literacy, pre-numeracy activities, language, social and physical development in these preschool programs. Studies have shown that literacy skills such as letter-name recognition, phonological and print awareness affect the reading achievement of children. However, in the rush to provide these skills, preschool programs cannot overlook the important role that culture plays. There is an important place for multicultural education and even an anti-bias curriculum. Several reasons are given for multicultural education from the need to confront the harmful effects of racism, as well as the need to address the poor academic performance of the growing number of children from ethnic groups of color who are entering schools. This paper will outline some of the benefits of pre-school programs and address some of the issues contribute to the development of a high quality early childhood literacy programs that also values culture and diversity.

Introduction

Studies which focus on early childhood programs in the United States have highlighted the benefits for students who participate in these programs. Some of these programs include Head Start, the Perry Preschool Project, the Prenatal Early Infancy Project, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention, and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program. Research related to these programs has demonstrated that children who participated were more successful in school and life, than those children who had not had the benefit of such participation. This paper will address some of the literature about the success of early childhood programs but also some major components which will challenge educators to continue to produce programs that are not only successful but also culturally sensitive.

Studies have found that children who participate in high-quality programs, in comparison to those who have not, tend to

- have higher scores on math and reading achievement tests
- have greater language abilities,
- are better prepared to enter elementary school
- are more likely to pursue secondary education
- have less grade retention

- have less need for special education and other remedial coursework
- have lower dropout rates
- have higher high school graduation rates,
- have higher levels of schooling attainment
- have improved nutrition
- have better access to healthcare services and
- have higher rates of immunization (p.3)

Lynch (2004/5) continues by stating that children who participate in these early programs are less likely to be teenage parents and more likely to have higher employment rates. They also have a lower welfare dependency, drug use, and show less-frequent and less-severe delinquent behavior or engage in fewer criminal acts. Much of this information has been provided through the study of early preschool programs such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Intervention, the Prenatal Early Infancy Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program. The documentation gained from these programs has supported the increase in universal pre-kindergarten programs across the United States. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, beginning in 1962, was one of the longest running and best-documented programs following the participants into adulthood. Researchers state that the two most important factors related to the program's success were well-qualified teachers and the charismatic leadership of its founder (High/Scope Resource 2005).

The Head Start Program in the United States started in 1965 and was the federal government's way of addressing the War on Poverty. Head Start provided children who were at risk of failing in school the opportunity to be exposed to activities in order to enhance their academic achievement (Gordon & Browne 2004). While not as well documented as some of the

other programs, the Head Start program has been very successful in preparing children for entry into the public school system. The Head Start program led to other programs such as the Parent and Child Centers, the Child and Family Resource Programs and the Child Development Associate credential (Gordon and Browne 2004). Unfortunately, Head Start programs have suffered from budget cuts and controversy over its long term effectiveness (Niesslein 2003; Lewis 2003). Nevertheless, the benefits of preschool programs have caused many states to institute pre-kindergarten or preschool programs as part of their educational extensions into the earlier grades. According to Poppe & Clothier (2007) over 40 states now offer some type of state funded preschool program.

Although the promise of early childhood education is evident, there are also some obstacles that can impede the development of sound, effective programs. One of the issues frequently cited by researchers (Lewis 2006) is how to provide quality programs. Another issue is how to sustain the early gains made by children in these early programs into the primary grades. A third issue is how to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs. A fourth issue is related to how to develop a truly appropriate curriculum.

Researchers who have studied high quality early childhood development programs are in agreement that good programs have some things in common (Lynch 2004/5). These include:

> well educated and trained staff; a low child –to-teacher ratio and small classes; a rich curriculum that emphasizes language, pre-literacy, and pre-numeracy activities , as well as motor, emotional, and social development; health and nutritional services; and lots of structured and unstructured play (p.3).

Other components include the need to provide a variety of activities from which children can choose to participate; direct interaction with the teacher; children and materials; and parental

involvement. Some experts feel that because of the positive results cited previously that early childhood development programs are worth the expense of funding them. They state that the benefit far outweighs the costs (Lewis 2006; Lynch 2004/5; Poppe and Clothier 2007; Niesslein 2003). So what are the costs to governments who consider pursuing these kinds of programs?

Research points to two scenarios. The first relates to the cost that governments would incur for such programs and the second relates to the subsequent effect on the economy and crime. Lynch (2004/5) discusses the following effects on governments. He states that because students would spend less time in school and long term public education expenses would be lower in the end. Lynch also states that crime costs would be decreased because of the lower incidence of crime and delinquency. Third, student participants and their parents would have higher income and pay more taxes than those who did not participate. This also means that these people would have higher levels of education and therefore have work potential which would reduce the public welfare expenditure. In terms of societal issues, there would be less strain on the criminal justice system. The increased earnings of these children would also allow the U.S. to compete in a global economy more effectively. So what are the actual costs? Lynch (2004/5) argues that an investment in a program of this sort for young children would be fairly substantial in the first years because of the greater use of higher education ie. recruiting and training teachers. He estimated that if a program such as this had been started in 2004 it would have cost about $19.4 billion dollars. However, he estimated that this expense would have shrunk over the next 14 years. By the 17th year, or 2021, the initial expense (or deficit for the government) would have turned into a surplus because of the reduction of costs due to grade retention, and remedial education. A cost benefit for the nation would be that greater numbers of children would enter

the workforce which would result in more tax revenues and less welfare expenditures (Lynch 2004/5).

The question is whether the U. S. is willing to make the sacrifice. The U. S. government is currently reviewing Head Start with an eye to determine the most effective practices and to institute "early learning guidelines" that align to K-12 standards. Some question how much of this will be a true effort to meet the needs of young children. It is feared that President Bush's "Good Start, Grow Smart" initiative will be just another unfunded mandate such as No Child Left Behind, which focuses on the academics and ignores the features of Head Start which have made it so successful. Those features include parental involvement, health care screenings and follow –ups, and assistance for students with special needs (Lewis 2003; Niesslein 2003). These positive features may be at risk if government steps in and sees testing as the most important evidence of achievement.

While government seeks to further regulate Head Start, Lewis (2003) reports that there does not seem to be the same concern over the greater issues such as high turnover rates in Head Start and the fact that most Head Start teachers often do not have college degrees. However, the gap in achievement would be even greater if these children did not have the experience and opportunity, afforded by Head Start (Lewis 2003). The unfortunate part is that fewer than half of eligible children have access to Head Start. Others cite the fact that children in these early programs are still behind other more affluent children, (Lewis 2003; Niesslein 2003). Unfortunately, just because children may attend Head Start or some other preschool program it are does not guarantee that they will be adequately prepared for kindergarten or the primary grades. Neither does it insure that these children are prepared with the same level of readiness for kindergarten as other children from more affluent families.

There are several factors that are very important to the development of successful early education programs that are sensitive to cultural diversity. One of the most important is a good pre-literacy program. Other factors that are equally important are well-trained teachers, and "intentionality" to provide a program that respects cultural diversity. "Intentionality" is defined as planned learning for certain outcomes, not just "discovery" learning.

Researchers point to the development of reading achievement as a predictor of success in the later grades (Schickedanz 2004) One major element of eventual reading success relates to the development of pre-literacy skills. Research tells us that "lower levels of oral vocabulary and poorer overall oral language skills do not directly compromise a child's learning to read." However, skills such as letter-name recognition, phonological and print awareness do affect the reading achievement of children (Schickedanz 2004).

However, the success of any pre-literacy program is only as effective as the teacher. Highly qualified, well trained teachers will have the background knowledge necessary to the development of a high quality literacy program. Teachers who are educated in early childhood literacy development understand the steps necessary to facilitate language development in children. Well trained teachers provide opportunities for children to handle books, comprehend pictures and stories, and read stories. Early childhood educators, who understand the importance of oral language development, provide opportunities for their students to use language in interactions with adults and gain print awareness. They use opportunities to listen and respond to stories, and encourage parents to support their children by talking to them. Well trained teachers also understand and apply the other components of a sound literacy program.

While there is little debate about the necessity of having teachers who are qualified, Vukelich (2004) points out that there is some controversy over content knowledge. The question

is basically what content knowledge teachers should have. According to Vukelich (2004), most studies have not focused on the preparation of literacy teachers or early childhood teachers of literacy. She goes on to query as to the subject matter necessary for early childhood teachers of literacy. Despite the lack of research in this area, however, most educators are in agreement that teachers need to possess certain foundational knowledge of the reading and writing process, language development and the acquisition of early reading, including variations related to cultural and linguistic variations (Vukelich 2004). Teachers also need to know the major components of reading which include "phonemic awareness, word identification, vocabulary and background knowledge, fluency, comprehension, and motivation. It is interesting that Vukelic (2004) also states that the research concerning "the effect of teachers' pedagogical knowledge has on student achievement" is sparse. However, she goes on to state that teacher educators and teachers believe that knowledge of pedagogy and skills are necessary for teachers to be successful with children in early childhood programs.

Another area that is extremely important is cultural sensitivity. Supporting a program that is culturally and linguistically sensitive to young children is as much important as the literacy and quality of the teachers. The numbers of children who are ethnically and linguistically diverse and attending school and preschool is growing. These children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have another issue. They have to learn and adjust to the dominant culture's language and schooling structure. This is where the use of culture is important and can serve two purposes. First it can foster a culturally relevant curriculum through "intentionality" as a means of instruction and the used of multicultural materials for the acquisition of literacy skills. It can also serve to reduce potential prejudice and bias by early childhood teachers and caregivers.

So how does one address these issues? One way is through multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy. The main goal of multicultural education is to empower students to become knowledgeable, caring, active citizens in a diverse world. Given this goal, it makes sense that literacy and multicultural education should go hand in hand. While we want student who excel academically, we also want caring and responsible citizens. Banks (2001, 2006) provides some additional rationales for multicultural education and some models to use. He states that multicultural education is more than curriculum adjustment by using content integration. It is designed to create educational equity. He describes the other four dimensions of multicultural education as prejudice reduction, empowering school culture and social culture, the support of learning, and equity pedagogy by using teaching methods that reach all children, and the knowledge construction process (Banks 2001, 2006). Ladson-Billings (1994) cites six variables that influence culturally relevant or "good" teaching. These variables include beliefs about students, content and material, instructional approaches, educational settings, teacher education, and race and ethnicity. Culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching that empowers children (Ladson-Billings 1994).

Children from diverse cultures have some unique obstacles in terms of reading achievement. Consider the following, Lewis (2006) states that children from poor families have been exposed to and have heard 32 million words less than children of professionals (see University of Kansas study by B. Hart and T. Risley). According to McCollin and O'Shea (2005), "students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often experience difficulties with phonological awareness because of limited levels of literacy (p.41)." They provide several suggestions to not only increase reading achievement but also ways to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, McCollin and O'Shea state that

phonological awareness includes providing “directed opportunities to listen for and discriminate between letter sounds and sounds within words (p.41).” One of the ways to address the gaps in phonological awareness is to use a variety of instructional materials at various reading levels that also hold meaning for students because they are culturally and linguistically relevant. Another example is to use letter games based on home or community events and another is to utilize decoding activities that are based on family or ethnic traditions. McCollin and O’Shea provide a number of other suggestions to address phonemic awareness as well as gaps in fluency, and comprehension.

Hepburn (2004) also provides a number of suggestions for multicultural education families, providers and administrators. One suggestion for families is to “support multicultural and anti-bias education by sharing their own cultural perspective and experience (p. 223).” Some suggestions for providers are to “support multicultural and anti-bias curriculum by raising personal awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity (p.223).” She also suggests that providers should use the whole learning environment and curriculum as teachable moments. Hepburn suggests that administrators should establish policies that support respect for diversity and multiculturalism, make resources available, and encourage facility-wide activities. The goal of multicultural education is to empower students and make them aware of and appreciate the culture and diversity around them.

Hepburn (2004) too, cautions against viewing culture as an add-on; believing that discussing differences will lead to conflict; reinforcing stereotyping by only focusing on differences; taking the tourist approach, conducting separate lessons and thinking that the curriculum has been developed and in place. She also provides a checklist for implementing an anti-bias curriculum and one for care giving. Gordon and Brown (2004) provide a few other suggestions. They include:

- Experiment with different group arrangements to encourage social harmony and cooperation.
- Provide a range of ways for children to learn material to accommodate a wide range of learning styles
- Use direct-teaching for important information that everyone should know…
- Learn the meaning of different behaviors for your students; find out how they feel when they are praised or corrected, talk with family members to discover the meaning of gestures, expressions or other responses that are unfamiliar to you.
- Emphasize meaning in teaching, that is make sure students understand the concept by using examples from everyday experiences.
- Get to know the customs, traditions, and values of your students. Teachers need to have an understanding of children's culture and history, and beliefs; analyze different traditions for common themes… (p.429).

Some other suggestions include helping students detect racist and sexist messages, analyzing the curriculum for biases and helping children to discuss ways that their communication with each other may be biased and discuss expressions of prejudice (p. 430). A good early childhood education program can be developed if these factors are taken into account.

Finally, early childhood educators are aware that biases are a part of one's perceptions. Biases are formed early in the lives of individuals. Implicit in multicultural education is intentionality which is the practice of deliberately attending to the issues of creating a multicultural environment. Just adding multicultural lessons is not enough. Children should not only learn about the differences among people but also similarities. Hepburn (2004) cites the

need to explore our differences and similarities as individuals and groups and to develop skills for identifying and countering the hurtful impact of bias on themselves and their peers. This is true for caregivers and teachers as well as children.

Researchers have documented that people are influenced by their own childhood experiences. Early childhood educators need to examine the biases and prejudices within themselves or their own cultural baggage (Briztman 1987; Derman-Sparks 1989). It is because of these biases some researchers express the need for multicultural education both for pre-service and experienced teachers (Kailin 1998; King 1994; Sparks 1994). Researchers tell us that multicultural education is especially important, since most of the nation's teachers are white and female, while the majority of children are Black or of other ethnic groups, and that is unlikely to change (Irvine 1990; Kailin 1998). In fact, Kailin refers to teaching as the "raced" profession as well as the "gendered" profession. Researchers such as Kailin(1998) and Cross (1993) also point out the need to incorporate multiculturalism in more than a superficial manner. It is not enough to offer one or two courses, but there is the need to address the institutional structures that do not support a multicultural education philosophy or efforts.

Other researchers suggest that multicultural education should go deeper and provide anti-racist education (King 1994; Kailin 1998; Graybill 1998; Derman-Sparks 1994). The attention to the place of culture in early childhood programs is essential. It is so important that some other still other researchers discuss the relationships between teacher beliefs and attitudes which translate into teacher practice (Irvine 1990; Hamilton 1993; Tatto 1998; Derman-Sparks 1994; King 1994).

Finally the question is how to make these programs available to those who need them. Lewis (2003) points out that fewer than half of eligible children attend Head Start. In addition mere

attendance in preschool programs does not guarantee reading readiness or school readiness (Niesslein 2003). Access to quality programs that also value culture will make the difference if reading readiness and academic achievement is the goal of early childhood education. As long as there are inequities in economics, there will be inequity of access to quality early childhood programs. Therefore, one challenge is to provide good programs which practice culturally relevant pedagogy. A second challenge is to make these programs accessible to children regardless of socioeconomic status. A third is providing the necessary funding. However, when we look at the promise of well educated caring adults, the rest should fall in place.

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