Status and Potential of Public Preschool Education Programs

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Abstract

Establishing effective preschool programs is an international issue.Such programs have tremendous potential for enhancing students' successes in the following years of formal education.Effective preschool programs also can have a substantial economic impact on a country through the earning power of participants as adults and through their contributions to business, industry, and technological advancements.Head Start and other preschool programs sponsored by public schools in the United States logically represent well-spent government funds.Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these publicly-funded preschool programs on children has a checkered history of success when compared to similar children not in these programs, as measured by performance in the kindergarten through high school formal education cycle. Key components of effective publicly-funded preschools include curriculum, staff training, and program evaluation.

Keywords: preschool education and components for effectiveness

1.0 Background

Preschool education offered by public schools and Head Start agencies in the United States is appealing to legislators, government officials, school personnel, and parents. It seems logical that the earlier children start formal education andreceive professional instruction, the better they will perform when entering the formal kindergarten through grade 12 of high school (K-12) educational sequence.The same is true for other countries throughout the world.Typical reasoning for preschool programs is epitomized in observations such as "Research shows that 90 percent of the brain is developed by age five.Dollars invested in children's education during this critical stage of their development have a measurable impact [in later life]" (Zwolack, 2017, p. 3).Universal public preschool continues to receive considerable attention in countries throughout the world, including the United States.The Obama administration advocated universal preschool starting at age four.In the United States, several states (e.g., Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma) have universal public preschools, and legislators in numerous other states are discussing the topic.Preschools supported by tax dollars are at a crossroads in that many need to demonstrate more effectiveness in preparing children for the K-12 cycle and especially avoid the "fadeout" effect where skills initially begin dissipating after several years.

2.0 History of Public Pre-K Education in the United States

Head Start is the preschool program that initiated the movement on a large scale commencing in 1965."President Johnson launched Head Start in 1965 as a part of a National WarOn Poverty specifically to break the cycle of failure experienced by manylower-income and poor Americans.By providing young children and their families with healthcare, social services, and opportunities to learn,HeadStart aimed to remove hurdles facing disadvantaged children andenable themto start school on equal footing with middle class peers"(Barnett&Friedman-Krauss, 2016, p. 9).Originally an 8-week summer pilot program, Head Start expanded to a school-year-long program.Initially, children received one year of service through Head Start, but this was changed in the 1980's when children at age three could begin receiving services.In 1998, the focus on Head Start programming was switched from the development of social competencies to school readiness skills (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2016). Head Start was funded for about 8.6 billion dollars in FY15 and served approximately one million students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).Most Head Start programs are not administered by public schools, as exemplified by the state of Illinois, where only a few public schools manage these programs.

The growth and development of preschools conducted by local school districts followed a growth pattern similar to Head Start. In most situations, the administrative agent for Head Start is not the local public school.Preschools conducted by public school systems often receive supplemental funds from the state and federal governments. As has been the trend for Head Start, over the years the preschools conducted by public schools have increased enrollment and instructional time.For the 2012-13 school year, about 1.2 million four-years-old were enrolled in public preschool programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).The number of children enrolled in preschools conducted by public schools varies considerably from state-to-state, as well as between school districts within a state. Sufficient funding is an ongoing problem in many states.As is the case with Head Start, most public-school preschools have criteria that identify students with high needs in the context of prioritizing who gets served.During the 50 plus years since Head Start began in the United States, and when many local school districts initiated preschool programs, private preschools have flourished.While many private preschools are non-profit or not-for-profit, some are profit-driven and charge up to five figures for enrollment.

3.0 Effectiveness of Public Preschool Programs

"Private and public investments in early childhood education have expanded significantly in recent years.Despite this heightened investment, we have little empirical evidence on whether children today enter school [kindergarten] with different skills than they did in the late nineties" (Bassok& Latham, 2017, p. 7).However, Bassok and Latham (2017) concluded that, when comparing 1998 data with 2010 data, the effectiveness of preschools had improved.The 2010 preschool students entered kindergarten with stronger numeracy and literacy skills than the 1998 group.For the behavioral skills of children,the results were mixed, meaning that for some specific behavioral outcomes advances were made, while the change was minimal for others.A study in Child Trends (2015) utilized reports by parents regarding the extent to which their children could recognize literacy in the alphabet as the basis for the evaluation.This study compared 1993 data with 2012 data.The findings indicatedthat the 2012 students did demonstrate stronger academic skills in letter identification in the alphabet compared to the 1993 group.An analysis of Head Start's effectiveness reviewed by Barnett and Friedman-Krauss (2016) concluded that "research has not been universally positive" regarding the effectiveness of Head Start over the decades (p. 10).However, several studies done over the past decade indicate that Head Start has been effective.The qualifier of this conclusion is that there was "substantial variation in which children did and did not benefit from the program, as well as the size and duration of those impacts" (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2016, p. 10).In essence, over time Head Start has become more effective, but still has considerable variation in its effectiveness from program-to-program and state-to-state in the U.S.

The Tulsa, Oklahoma Head Start program has been very successful over multiple years.Research conducted by Phillips, Gormley, and Anderson (2016) concluded that the Tulsa program had positive effects carrying over into middle school.The researchers noted that the Tulsa preschoolers "scored significantly higher on the state math and achievement tests in middle school (grades 6-8), demonstrated significantly lower rates of grade retention, and were significantly less likely to be chronically absent" in comparison to a similar group of students who did not have preschool experiences (Phillips, Gormley, & Anderson, 2016, p. 1).The Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the Chicago Child/Parent Centers, and the New Jersey Abbott Preschool Program are additional examples of successful preschool programs (Egalite, 2016).In summary, the effectiveness of public preschool programs has improved over the past decades.However, research on the effectiveness of preschools is, to some extent, still in question.A major concern of preschool programs' effectiveness pertains to the concept of "fadeout."Fadeout addresses the extent to which gains made by preschool children as measured by when they enter kindergarten are lost, compared to a similar non-preschool group of children during the same passage of time.Results for preschool children several years after entering the K-12 cycle often showed no significant advantages over comparable students who had not been in preschool.

4.0 Suggestions for Maximizing Effectiveness of Public Preschool Programs[1]

Head Start and preschools administered by public schools in the United States need to demonstrate their effectiveness and worth in these tight financial times.One issue is the degree to which federal, state, and local school districts are willing to pay for quality improvements.

The suggestions offered here are likely to enhance these preschool programs and result in children's needs being more effectively met.Some suggestions, such as increased salaries for staff that would be required to have additional formal education (e.g., bachelor's or master's degrees for teachers, and two-year associate's degrees for aides), are expensive.Other suggestions, such as those pertaining to parent involvement, have minimal additional costs.It is hoped that officials administering publicly-funded preschool programs will consider these suggestions, even if they are only able to adopt some of them due to financial restraints.

4.1 Staffing Issues

4.1.1 Training. Many public preschool programs (Title I and local school district-sponsored preschools) need teachers that are trained through university-based bachelor's and master's degree programs in early childhood education anddevelopment.Aides frequently need more formal training in early childhood education and development than they obtain through completion of an associate's (2 year) degree from a community college.The university and community college-based programs must have up-to-date, state-of-the-art, and best-practice standards driving their curriculum.[2]

4.1.2 Mentoring. Teachers, aides, and other staff associated with program implementation need ongoing mentoring.The key to effective mentoring is the rapport and trusting relationship between the mentor and mentee, and the mentee's perception of the mentor's credibility. The mentor must provide psychological support, as well as specific expertise, in meeting the issues and concerns of the preschool staff member.It is preferable for someone other than the staff member's supervisor to be the mentor because the staff member may want to share concerns and perspectives dealing with the supervisor.The mentor should encourage the staff member to holistically reflect on issues and concerns in viewing how effectively children's needs are being met.A special emphasis should be placed on the mentee examining causation—what works, and why;what does not work, and why; and what needs to be changed, and why?The mentor should guide the staff member in finding answers to these questions.

4.1.3 Coaching. Usually the staff member's supervisor will serve as the coach with the goal of helping her/him to better serve the students' needs.Coaching assumes that clear expectations have been established for the preschool staff member through a job description and specific job expectations.Coaching provides feedback to the staff member that is specifically linked to job expectations.Feedback to the preschool staff member should answer the question, "How am I doing?"Much of the feedback will be positive reinforcement for what the staff member has effectively performed.When performance does not meet expectations, coaching takes place by the supervisor interacting collaboratively with the staff member in identifying ideas for improving performance.Coaching needs to identify what specific behavioral changes are needed and the assistance (including resources) that will be given to help the staff member effectively meet expectations.

4.1.4 Development. Development pertains to staff members continuing to grow and expand their expertise while serving in their preschool roles.It deals with staff members acquiring skills that they do not presently possess, but which are needed in order to continue to grow on the job and better serve children.The personalized learning approach through an individualized development plan should be established for staff members that includes traditional face-to-face development through conferences, workshops, and on-the-job activities.Technology-delivered,competency-based professional learning programs should also be developed which require measurable mastery of content (referred to as micro-credentialing).

4.2 The CIA Connection

(Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment)

There must be a tight connection between curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a preschool program. Curriculum is the content to be delivered to the children, instruction means the processes (teaching practices) used to deliver the curriculum, and assessment addresses each child's progress in mastering the curriculum. The curriculum needs to be state-of-the-art, based onthe most recent research-based standards, and address the whole child—literacy, numeracy, psychomotor, social-emotional, physical skills, and health/nutrition practices.

(It is understood, however, that the emphasis of preschool programs may vary from program-to-program.)Most importantly, the content delivered to children must match their specific developmental needs at that moment in time.The curriculum should guide instruction and the materials and activities used in preschool programs (Duncan, Jenkins, Auger, Burchinal, Domina, &Bitler, 2015).Instruction should use the mastery approach and be based on an individual development plan for each child.This does not exclude whole group instruction, but stresses instruction that has the flexibility to be tailored to the needs of each child.Hands-on activities are extremely important, as is one-on-one instruction at specific times.A variety of institutional approaches should be used to ensure that the content (curriculum) delivered is based on children's needs.

Observing children's behaviors and performance daily and making instructional adjustments based on these observations are the cornerstones of meaningful formative assessment.An effective staff member may easily make over 100 of these instructional adjustments daily in a full day preschool environment.Staff members must be extremely active observers and possess the knowledge and skills to make these adjustments.Multiple measures are essential for summative assessments because a child's performance at this age can vary significantly from week-to-week, and even day-to-day.The precision or reliability of such measures is a critical issue, as is validity and potential test bias.At the start of the year, more formal assessments must be made in order to identify theneeds of each child and be used as baseline data for formative, intermediate, and summative information in tracking his/her progress.This assessment data can also be used for program evaluation and the accountability Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).Many measures will require performance assessments anchored in rubrics that are field-tested and for which staff members have comprehensive training to address reliability (precision and comparability),validity, and bias (Lane, 2017).

4.3 Evaluation the CIPP Model[3]

The evaluation suggested here needs to be cross-referenced with the criteria for the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) addressed under the forthcoming section of this article entitled "Accountability."A comprehensive evaluation of preschool programs addresses: Context:What are the specific assumptions on which the program is based?Are these assumptions logical and being effectively addressed through the delivery system? What are the specific purposes of the preschool program?For each purpose, what are the specific objectives that must be accomplished for the preschool program to be successful?(These objectives will anchor the following three evaluation phases.)Answers to these questions drive the data and information collected for this section.Inputs:What are the resources required to effectively implement each of the objectives flowing from the purposes identified in the preschool program?How adequate are each of these resources for each objective?Identify any deficiencies that exist in resources that impact effective program implementation.Process:For each objective, what are the key components of the delivery system used to implement the program? Specifically list each component of the delivery system referring to each of the program's objectives.Determine the effectiveness of the delivery system for each objective.Products:What are the outcomes of the program linked to the specific purposes, goals, and objectives identified in the context section of this evaluation process?This must include hard data based on pre- and post-testing, as well as data anchored in the perceptions of staff, parents, and other stakeholders.

4.4 Parent Involvement

School personnel may need to help some parents develop a skill set that will assist in empowering them to maximize their contribution to the parent involvement program.Specifically:Parent self-image and identity:This represents program personnel assisting parents to be self-confident and empowering them to believe that they can make significant contributions for their children through the parent involvement program.Locus of control:Since some parents may feel a sense of helplessness or that they can have little impact or control in the parent involvement process, school personnel must "lift them up" and show them how they can make valuable contributions to their children's education.Parenting development and maturity: This requires program personnel to provide information and insights to parents that, if needed, show parents they can continue to develop parenting skills over time and grow in this area.The following are six basic components of an effective parent involvement program anchored to Epstein's (2011) work.Each component is broken down into specific activities.

1. Recognize basic obligations of families
- Develop parenting skills that prepare children for preschool
- Build positive home conditions that support preschool learning and appropriate behavior
- Understand developmental levels of children as they progress in age
- Provide for dietary and other physical needs, and health care

2. Recognize basic communication obligations of schools
- Make sure all communications are respectful of parents' roles in their children's education, at home and at school
- Develop videos and other social media highlighting school events, teachers, and available resources
- Provide families with information about age-appropriate cognitive, social, and psychological development activities for their children
- Communicate with families about school programs and children's progress
- Practice open two-way communication and mutual respect when interacting face-to-face with parents
- Communicate with parents about good behavior and academic successes, not just negative happenings
- Strive to make parents feel comfortable when communicating with school personnel in the context of understanding that, based on past experiences as students, they may have feelings of alienation
- Understand the challenges faced by single parents, grandparents, Godparents, foster parents and other caregivers regarding participation

3. Recognize involvement at school by parents
- Conduct workshops for parents focused on interests and issues relevant to their children's educational needs (by including them in the planning)
- Involve parents in children's school activities
- Have a parent area in the school with coffee, snacks, educational materials, and information related to their children (also display artwork and other materials produced by children in this area)
- Have opportunities for parents to see children perform at school, in their immediate neighborhood/community, and at places such as malls in the greater geographical area (assist with transportation, when needed)

4. Recognize involvement in learning activities at home
- Assist parents with learning activities at home that are coordinated with children's classwork
- Assist parents to better utilize their energies on activities at home that are suitable and attainable within children's daily routines
- Provide easy access for parents to know specific homework assignments for their children
- Provide parents with information, resources, and skills related to helping their children at home and understanding the expectations of each grade level
- Link parents to community agencies that will assist them with home-based educational activities for their children

5. Provide involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy
- Involve parents in school committees such as advisory councils, school improvement teams, and independent advocacy groups
- Seek suggestions from parents for input regarding school and district policies and procedures

6. Utilize collaboration and exchanges with community organizations
- Connect parents with agencies, businesses, and other groups that support their children's educational activities at school
- Utilize community resources that aid parents who do not have a means of transportation or child care for siblings and which prevent them from being involved
- Work with public libraries to support and assist parents with educational materials for their children
- Work with organizations that provide food and nutritional assistance

4.5 Accountability

Pupil-teacher ratios should not exceed 10:1 which will allow for individualization when needed.Programs need to be conducted with due diligence, prudent use of resources, and the efficient time usage of staff.Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) has excellent credibility and is the accountability model used for numerous public preschool programs.A description is:"A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is an organized way to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early care and education programs that families consider for their children. A QRIS empowers parents to become savvy consumers who choose high qualityeducation for their children; gives policymakers effective tools to improveEC&E quality; promotes accountability so that donors,legislators, and taxpayers feel confident investing in quality;gives providers a roadmap to quality improvement; and promotes the health and development of children in early care and education" (Alliance for Early ChildhoodFinance, 2017, p. 1).Preschools funded by tax dollars need to constantly be cost conscious, but not at the expense of quality, to assure prudent implementation and to create a positive image of effective management of funding sources. A component of accountability is an aggressive public information program to keep stakeholders and the public up-to-date on the program's activities, accomplishments, and general news. Suspensions and expulsions have been unacceptably high in some programs.Staff members should be well-versed in proactive preventative measures to utilize with children to avoid behaviors from initially occurring that eventually prompt suspensions and lead to expulsions.

4.6 Diverse Learners

"If we can get typical kids in the room doing typical preschool behavior, then our special needs children will imitate it, and grow from what they see and hear!" (Bryant, 2017). Public preschool programs must be inclusive for children with special needs so that these children can also get a "head start" on their formal education.These children need to experience the spectrum of the whole curriculum, with special emphasis on movement and physical activities.Of course, rest will be needed periodically during the day, especially for all-day programs.The integration of learners into the "mainstream" of activities whose language is not the native language is critical to their holistic development. Understandably, some instruction will initially be in the native language of these children, but some preschool activities are not native language dependent.

5.0 Concluding Thoughts

Preschool programs have the potential for significantly impacting their participants' future formal education and the economies of countries throughout the world.In the United States, Head Start and preschools conducted by public schools have tremendous potential.Head Start began in 1965 and was aimed at giving children the opportunity for quality learning who,through no fault of their own, were disadvantaged or at risk of not reaching their full potential when entering the formal education cycle at kindergarten.Public-funded preschools need to continue operating in this context of truly giving low-income and poverty-stricken children an equitable opportunity to enter the formal educational cycle (kindergarten)competitively in comparison to the more economically fortunate students.In order for this to occur, the fadeout effect (dissipation of initial gains enjoyed at kindergarten fading out within several years) must be overcome.

Footnotes

[1]Categories in this section are based on Wechsler, M., Melnick, H., Maier, A., & Bishop, J. (2016). *The building blocks of high-quality early childhood programs* (California Policy Brief).Retrieved from the Learning Policy Institute website: https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/wp-ontent/uploads/2016/02/LPI_ECE-quality-brief_WEB-022916.pdf

[2]For specifics regarding training see Whitebrook, M., McLean, C., & Austin, L. (2016).*See early childhood workforce index 2016*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California; and Bernoteit, S.A., Holt, J.K., & Kirchhoff, A. (2017). *Advancing the Illinois early childhood education workforce: A model college and career pathway* (IERC 2017-3). Edwardsville, IL: Illinois Education Research Council at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

[3]For detailed description of the CIPP Model see Stufflebeam, D.L. & Zhang, G. (2016). *The CIPP evaluation model*. New York: Guilford Press.

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