

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Merging Policy and Practice: Powerful Teaching and Learning in Preschool

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This research to practice summary describes how an 8-week case study used field notes, interviews, and video-based fieldwork to examine local instructional practices and to investigate the policies and protocols which facilitate these practices. We describe how one Head Start classroom successfully navigated external accountability mandates while privileging students' academic development and overall well-being when they attended to organizational infrastructure, instructional capacity, and the factors at their intersection. Findings indicate that while policies and protocols necessitated by external mandates impacted the organizational infrastructure, their intentional integration with sound pedagogy and the Center's mission facilitated instructional capacity in a climate where children thrive. We therefore discuss how such decisions can be replicated in other Head Start locations.

Keywords: early childhood policy; early childhood protocols; compliance; instructional practices; classroom interactions

INTRODUCTION

In an era of increased accountability and decreased availability of resources, many Head Start programs face the dual challenge of meeting the requirements of external mandates to assure continued funding while simultaneously meeting the social, emotional, and academic needs of the children and families whom they serve. While the social, cultural, and historical contexts of no two Head Start locations (or even classrooms!) are exactly alike, most local providers are working within the same national circumstances. It may be helpful, therefore, to highlight the successes of specific locations in the hopes that their experiences and stories may be of benefit to others. In this spirit, we investigated a 4-year-old Head Start classroom situated within a large urban

community to ask: How does one preschool classroom balance the requirements of external accountability and the need for high quality instruction to meet the teaching and learning needs of teachers and students?

When focusing on the policies and protocols of influence on, and influenced by, the teachers' instructional practices, we see that the Triangle¹ classroom, and the center in which it is situated, are examples of success. As is common of all Head Start programs, the center must contend with external social and economic factors while complying with external mandates to secure funding in an economically under-resourced context. Head Start programs are deliberately community-based, and effectively navigating policies is context-dependent, with programs successfully working within parameters to provide students with a rigorous and compassionate early education.

We use a bioecological lens (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to investigate the Triangle community's successful navigation of accountability while continuing to privilege students' academic development and overall well-being. A bioecological model transitions the focus on the influences of processes as dynamic influences rather than the environment as a static influence. We describe one classroom's navigation of external accountability and effective, developmentally appropriate instruction through investigating both interpersonal relationships as well as the resources of ability, skill, and knowledge in one early childhood classroom.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

To make sense of the complex social interactions and the multiple networks of influence on the instruction observed in the Triangle classroom, we engaged in an 8-week case study (Yin, 2013) paired with video-based fieldwork (Jewitt, 2012) to describe classroom instructional practices and the policies and protocols facilitating these practices. Qualitative methods, such as interviews with key personnel and observational field notes generated during class time and team meetings, informed our understanding of the broader systemic structures in place, whereas the video data facilitated an up-close understanding of the interactions between teachers and students. We also reviewed artifacts supplied by the broader funding agency including job descriptions, employee handbooks, parent communication, and curricular guidelines to help us understand the origins of the policies witnessed in practice.

In addition to a handful of infant and toddler classrooms on the main level, the Center houses six preschool classrooms on the second floor of their building, situated on a main thoroughfare in a community on the south side of a large midwestern city. The Triangle community consists of 17 students and three teachers, and receives blended funding from Head Start, Preschool for All, and the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Mrs. Zachmann is in her third year in the Triangle classroom and her third year teaching. Mr. Pearson is an African American teacher with 12 years of experience, and Mrs. O'Neal is an African American teacher with 31 years of experience. Both Mr. Pearson and Mrs. O'Neal have spent the last four years in the Triangle classroom, which consists of pre-kindergarten students ages 4 and 5. Some of the students are in their second year

¹ Participant-selected pseudonyms are used in place of all names and locations

in this classroom due to recent center reorganization. All classroom teachers, all 17 students, and three building administrators consented to participate in the study designed.

In total, 30 observational field notes, 12 interview transcripts, and 5 collaborative team meeting transcripts were generated and analyzed alongside classroom and center artifacts for evidence of center-level policies and protocols as the plausible causes of the rich interactions between teachers and children captured on video. Over 140 hours of video data were generated over four sequential weeks, collected using three video cameras simultaneously. This range of data collected allowed analysis across contexts and through various viewpoints. All data were collected by the second author, and as a white, cisgender woman immersed in the higher education community, it was imperative that multiple data sources were collected from multiple perspectives to assure the lived experiences of primarily Black participants was representative of their realities and not whitewashed by the authors' positionalities. The second author maintained positionality field notes throughout the process of data generation, and regularly cross-checked these during analysis. Reviewing the video data alongside participants and seeking member-checks following initial stages of analysis also served to mitigate potential misunderstandings arising from our social, political, and cultural differences.

Mirroring Compton-Lilly's (2007) process of analyzing classroom level data contributed to a detailed account of the specific instructional experiences and perspectives for each of the participants to inform the construction of a preliminary codebook. Open coding of classroom observational data identified salient features of instruction, while interview and team meeting transcripts fleshed out the descriptions of enacted policies and protocols. Initial coding facilitated the identification of salient topics and the secondary constant comparative coding facilitated our identification, comparison, and sorting of data points according to similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categorical analyses were then applied to school-based data (i.e., the artifacts previously mentioned) and the codebook was expanded and revised to accommodate additional data. This allowed classroom interactions, events, and activities captured on video to be viewed side-by-side along the school-wide insights gathered via interview and artifact analysis.

FINDINGS

The policies and protocols necessitated by Head Start Program Performance Standards, coupled with other external accountability factors, created multiple influences on the teacher-child interactions and instructional capacity of the Triangle classroom.

Social Service Agency (SSA) Leadership

The SSA lives its mission to "partner with children, youth, and families whose potential is at risk to create hope, opportunity, and bright futures" by communicating this mission with every possible stakeholder, including the teachers, the kitchen staff, the cleaning crew, and the volunteers. Any adult spending time in the Center must complete training centered around this mission, making it clear from the outset that involvement with this organization will require a commitment to relationship building in both word and action.

Community Collaborative Childhood Center (CCCC) Leadership

While the demands of external compliance are often achieved when teachers and support personnel simply comply with protocols developed in a top-down decision-making model (Marzano, et al., 2005), the CCCC site director (Ms. Cooper) manages the day-to-day operations for the building, with educational coordinators overseeing and supporting the Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms. Shared decision making across leadership levels increases buy in from all stakeholders.

Workload & Division of Labor

The SSA's and the CCCC's commitment to promoting students' success and their commitment to protecting instructional time are reflected in the decisions made around infrastructural leadership. When non-instructional tasks are offloaded to support staff, and division of labor decisions are made at the classroom level, develop organically, and adjust fluidly, the teachers' workload is reduced and more of their energies can be spent focused on instruction and relationship building. This Center and the broader organization also intentionally seek out qualified employees who share a philosophy of life-long learning.

Professional Development

Participation in a multi-year grant-funded collaborative coaching program allowed the teaching team "to look at things from a different perspective," by supporting their implementation of reflective decision making. Mr. Pearson's and Ms. O'Neal's attitudes towards PD as a meaningful and reflective practice is attributed in part to their participation in quality PD, which included monthly on-site meetings and video reflection practices which both teachers described as the highlight of participation.

Curricular Decisions

While the Center leadership and the funding agency selected the adoption of the Creative Curriculum, the teachers' instructional capacity in implementing the curriculum fostered opportunities to engage students in meaningful ways. For example, curricular decisions emphasize student exploration and situated learning, as daily plans include 45-60 minutes of free center play. Teachers use these opportunities to reflect on ways to expand their usefulness through assessments and documentation.

Assessment & Documentation

While the Center’s protocol requires current and accurate evidence for all learning standards addressed, and Center administration checks classroom and student files sporadically for completion, the Triangle teachers comply with external requirements for data collection and documentation to authentically and meaningfully inform their practice. Teachers therefore create an environment which fosters student learning and well-being by integrating their PD knowledge to make decisions grounded in evidence and research.

Team Meetings

Instructional plans for each week reflected the collaborative climate and reflective conversations that occurred during the weekly meetings. These weekly meetings included discussion on what instructional approaches were working (or not working) with individual students based on teacher observations and documentation. Instructional decisions were then made after the teachers connected observations to the standards, drew on research to justify decision making, and set attainable goals to create unique solutions for individual students. The teachers were able to integrate their teaching philosophy into a collaborative plan, proving to be very influential to high quality teacher-child interaction. Also recognizing that physical classroom space impacts the ways children and adults learn and move, the teachers make decisions about materials available informed by student observations and order the daily schedule to support developmentally appropriate practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tighten Up Transitions

Instructional time is at a premium, and with additional requirements such as handwashing before and after mealtime, tooth brushing after breakfast, etc., it is imperative that students not spend time “sitting and waiting.” Consider creating a classroom routine where students seamlessly clear their breakfast table, brush their teeth, “move their clip” to indicate their attendance, and then select a book or dance along to a Go Noodle video on the carpet while waiting for the rest of the class to join them. This type of classroom routine facilitates independence, addresses multiple standards, and maintains students’ attention and interest without the need for ‘down time.’

Community of Individuals

Members of the CCCC feel appreciated for their individual contributions to a collective mission, which purposely makes space for diverse opinions, different approaches, and lots of personalities. Mrs. O’Neal explains that this works because of the dedication of the staff to “be present in the classroom. Be present for your staff, your coworkers, the children. You don’t know what they are going through in their day, and then we have to be present for each other.” The SSA and CCCC leadership cultivate relationships and intentionally hire individuals whom they respect, and this atmosphere infuses the building.

Strive for Continuous Improvement

Teachers, staff, and administrators consistently discuss how they can improve teaching and learning in their classroom and in the entire building. While the center celebrates successes and acknowledgements accomplishments, the adults in the building are tireless in their efforts to raise the bar of achievement for both themselves and the students. Continuous discussions about improvement result in a teaching climate that prioritizes academic achievement while developing the whole child. Similar to their ability to fulfill regulations and mandates in purposeful ways that do not compromise instructional quality, the SSA, the CCCC, and the employees believe that they and their students are worthy of educational environments always growing and improving.

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