

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Helping Head Start Teachers Support Children's School Readiness: Lessons Learned

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The lessons learned from the Head Start teachers (Butera, Friesen, & Stone-MacDonald, this issue) have important implications for policy and practice in Head Start. The importance of connecting the curriculum used in Head Start to the lives children lead in the community is apparent. It is also important to integrate activities designed to support children's academic readiness with those that support children's social competence especially to the extent that doing so reflects important values in the community. Finally, it is essential that Head Start teachers are aware of the importance of identifying children who struggle to learn early so they can be provided with needed support.

Keywords: implications for practice

Butera, Friesen and Stone-MacDonald (this issue) report findings from their six-year ethnographic study of Head Start teachers in a rural Appalachian community. In the study, the authors used observation and interview data to examine influences on teachers' decision making about daily activities that in essence comprise the Head Start program as it is delivered to children. The Head Start teachers in the study made ample use of their knowledge about the community to plan instruction and their decision-making was also informed by their personal and practical knowledge about children and the program (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Grisham, 2000; Vacca et al., 2003). Professional knowledge was less often seen as an influence and the teachers provided rather scant opportunities for children to learn academic readiness skills.

The authors remind us of the limitations of the study. The teachers in the study worked in an isolated community and the particular context of the study is not likely to be representative of Head Start programs across the country. Further, the teachers in the study were well-

experienced in Head Start and did not plan to seek additional professional coursework although they were well-aware that Head Start's mandate that they do so to keep their teaching positions. These circumstances suggest that the findings from the study may be limited in generalizability.

Despite these limitations, the Head Start teachers in the Butera et.al.(this issue) study have important lessons for us in the field about how to help teachers support the academic readiness of Head Start children. The importance of doing so is clear given the persistent problems children from low-income families have doing well in school. In the following manuscript we outline five lessons that may be drawn from the study.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IN HEAD START CURRICULA

The Head Start teachers in our study valued activities that helped children learn the skills they needed to become active members of their community. They emphasized the importance of play as the means through which children would learn to get along with each other, make friends and share. Unfortunately they tended to think that this emphasis precluded them from also emphasizing activities that supported children's academic readiness.

We suspect that these Head Start teachers are not alone in their beliefs about the extent to which providing Head Start children with academic readiness activities is developmentally inappropriate. Given the traditional stance of many early childhood educators about the value of play and "developmentally appropriate practice" both now and in the not too distant past, their beliefs are understandable. However, it is important to point out that in order to be optimally ready for school, children must acquire both academic and social skills. In recently developed models of curriculum for children at risk, researchers have combined curricula that address both children's academic and social learning needs (Bierman et.al 2008; Butera & Odom, 2013; Fantuzzo, Gadsden & McDermott, 2011). These efforts to provide an integrated framework for Head Start teacher's instructional planning have demonstrated effectiveness. The children in Head Start classes where their teachers used curriculum combining social and academic content demonstrated more positive outcomes than children whose teachers used other curriculum. The value of curricula is that it provides teachers with a framework to plan activities. Ensuring that curricula include the essential components for children's learning is apparent as curriculum can provide a framework that helps teachers decide what to do each day (Dickinson, Darrow, Ngo & D'Souza, 2009).

It is also clear that Head Start teachers must be helped to understand that social competence and academic readiness are not mutually exclusive. Veronica's description of the importance of cuddling when adults read books to children as a way to help children feel cared for as they learn important literacy skills as well as Ella's use of the volunteer reading stories in a rocking chair suggest that the teachers may not be that far away from this stance in their own thinking. What is needed is a concerted effort to infuse opportunities for children to learn academic skills into the many opportunities provided for them to learn social competence. Both aspects of development are essential to the goals of the Head Start program: to help ready children for school.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERVENING EARLY WHEN CHILDREN STRUGGLE TO LEARN

The teachers in our study were aware that some children in their Head Start classrooms were delayed in their learning. Their tendency to dismiss concerns about individual children, assuring themselves that children learn at different rates and in keeping with their own individual developmental trajectories is of grave concern. While there were instances when their “wait and see” attitude paid off as children unexpectedly made substantial and surprising developmental progress, there were other instances when children were denied services for which they were probably eligible and would no doubt help them progress. We suspected that the reluctance of the Head Start teachers in our study to seek help for some of the children in their care related to their feeling that they were not respected by their public school counterparts and indeed we witnessed instances when they were not shown respect in their dealings with the public schools. We are reminded that there continues to be work to do in order to improve service coordination and collaboration among the organizations that seek to optimize outcomes for our most vulnerable children.

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

The community funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) available to the teachers provided a rich source for curriculum. The Head Start teachers in our study were well-embedded in the communities in which they lived and taught. The degree to which this afforded them a rich opportunity to use their knowledge to plan learning activities for the Head Start children can scarcely be overstated. The Head Start children they taught benefitted immeasurably from activities that featured their community and they responded enthusiastically to the firemen’s visit and hung on the words of the hometown baseball hero. These were just a few examples of how the Head Start teachers we studied made decisions about instruction that connected to the community and expertise within it.

Using their practical and personal knowledge (Grisham, 2000; Vacca et al., 2003) the teachers had accumulated from years of teaching Head Start children, the teachers we studied created rich learning activities in many instances that could not have been easily replicated by teachers who may have had more impressive academic credentials but lacked this important community connection. It is important to recognize the contribution Head Start teachers from the community make and ensure that Head Start policies continue to prioritize hiring teachers from the community. In addition, the lessons from the Head Start teachers in our study suggest that curriculum must be localized in many respects so that it provides opportunities for teachers to make use of what they know about the funds of knowledge with the community.

EMBEDDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE

As lifelong members of the communities in which they taught, the Head Start teachers we studied were well-able to understand the cultural context in which they worked. The teachers valued the practical and personal knowledge they had about the children and families in the program and they used this knowledge to inform their teaching. On the other hand, they did not

value knowledge they might acquire through formal professional development including coursework leading to an undergraduate degree, even if it meant that they would lose their positions. It is probably important to note that the Head Start teachers we studied had taught on average for 17 years and described themselves as “too old” to pursue more schooling. No doubt their age contributed to their decision not to pursue additional teaching credentials. But they also insisted that the courses they would need to take were too often unrelated to the work they did with children and families in Head Start. Several of the teachers told us about struggling to pass courses in mathematics and language arts. In classroom settings with college-age students “young enough to be their grandchildren”, they felt humiliated by their difficulties. They also insisted that the coursework they would need to take to continue teaching did little to inform their work and in many instances, their point seemed well-made.

Addressing the need to increase the educational requirements for Head Start teachers requires careful thought regarding the intended outcomes of additional requirements. The importance of providing professional development clearly linked to the tasks of helping Head Start teachers acquire teaching skills related to supporting children’s school readiness is essential. For examples, the Head Start teachers we studied needed to understand the value of intentional teaching related to preparing children for school. No doubt this is best accomplished in the context of daily life of the Head Start program. Providing a variety of options for teachers to enhance their professional knowledge is important and these options must build on teaching competencies that are already evident in experienced Head Start teachers.

WHAT YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH IN A YEAR!

The Head Start teachers we studied reminded us that the tasks involved in supporting children’s learning are multi-faceted and best accomplished when the adults who care for them collaborate with one another. On a daily basis, teachers and parents worked to ensure that the comprehensive needs of the children were addressed. Meals were prepared and eaten, hands were washed and teeth were brushed; paperwork was completed, crying children were comforted and anxious parents were given reassurance. The complexity of tasks that were accomplished often appeared overwhelming but the Head Start teachers we studied remained cheerful and optimistic about the work that they clearly enjoyed. Addressing the needs of children and families who live in poverty is a complex undertaking and there is much work to be done. It is critical to consider the perspectives of those who are closest to the tasks at hand and celebrate daily progress as we support partnerships to plan how to make additional progress. If Head Start teachers are to undertake change in how they accomplish the daily tasks of their work, they must be provided with ample opportunity to conceptualize short-term objectives related to the long term goals of improving children’s school readiness.

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