

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Creating an Agency-Wide, Interdisciplinary Literacy Project in Comprehensive Early Childhood Programs

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An important area for early childhood programs offering comprehensive services is better understanding interdisciplinary collaboration, as this collaboration lays for foundation for supporting optimal child outcomes. This study examined some of the benefits and challenges of using an interdisciplinary approach by exploring the perspectives of staff members from across disciplines during a six-week, agency-wide literacy project. This study suggests that Head Start and Early Head Start staff members recognize the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration, but the experience of working across disciplines can be challenging. Implications of these results for practice are discussed.

Early childhood programs, especially those that are publically funded, are increasingly held accountable for the immediate and long-term academic success of the children they serve (Brown, 2011). As the nation's largest federally sponsored early childhood education program, Head Start's goal is to reduce socio-economic disparities, especially around school readiness (Puma, Bell, Cook, Heid, & Lopez, 2005). In this climate of increased accountability, the critical role emergent literacy plays in positive school outcomes has come to the national forefront of early childhood education issues (Hutinger, Bll, Daytner, & Johanson, 2006). One significant trend is for early childhood educators to focus on integrating literacy across content domains (Anderson & Fenty, 2013). In response, classroom practices are increasingly moving toward using literacy as the foundation for developmentally appropriate integrated instruction (Strickland, 2010).

In an effort to further reduce socio-economic disparities around school readiness, comprehensive early childhood programs must more effectively address the complex academic, psycho-social, and health needs of their students using an interdisciplinary approach (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004). Attaining positive outcomes for young children can no longer be accomplished through the singular efforts of any one person (Allensworth & Kolbe, 1987). Although it is universally acknowledged that early childhood teachers play a critical role in supporting all areas of young children's development, professionals from across disciplines play an increasingly important role in establishing and achieving collaborative goals that support optimal outcomes (Friend & Cook, 2010).

Interdisciplinary collaboration in comprehensive early childhood programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start, involves teachers, nurses, family advocates, special services personnel, transportation providers, nutritionists, and other professionals sharing information,

validating each other's roles, and providing input around which strategies promote positive outcomes for all children (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004). Despite the need to work together across disciplines in order to more effectively support young children's development, there are many challenges. These challenges include pre-existing responsibilities (Weist, Proescher, Prodente, Ambrose, & Waxman, 2001); a lack of shared values and beliefs (Rappaport, Osher, Anderson-Ketchmark, & Dwyer, 2003); and, differences in expectations (Bronstein & Terwilliger, 2007).

In order to create a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration, each person must have opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to collaborate (Friend & Cook, 2010). According to Friend & Cook (2010), collaboration is a style of interaction that can only occur when people engage in a specific process, task or activity. Therefore, it is essential that comprehensive early childhood programs create opportunities that bring together staff members from across disciplines to participate in interdisciplinary tasks or activities. The "Little Read" literacy project was developed with a primary goal of building capacity for a more integrated and interdisciplinary approach using developmentally appropriate practices as part of a thematic-based unit based on a classic piece of literature.

The Head Start and Early Head Start programs in which this study was conducted used the Creative Curriculum (Dodge, Colker, Heroman, & Bickert, 2002). In addition, these programs recently adopted new learning standards based on the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework and the Pre-K Foundation for the Common Core. The six-week literacy project that provided the central focus for this study was developed to enrich and complement the broad educational programming provided by the current curriculum.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2009, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences provided support for this agency to implement the "Big Read" project. The goal of this grant-funded program was to support community-wide exploration of a classic piece of literature. As part of this grant, the Head Start and Early Head Start programs collaborated with a local school district to develop an eight-week literacy project centered around *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 1998). After this grant ended and during 2010-2011, a group of Head Start and Early Head Start teachers developed a similar six-week project that they named the "Little Read."

In 2012, the agency in which this study took place broadened the scope of the six-week "Little Read" literacy project by engaging staff members from across disciplines (e.g. education, health services, nutrition services, family services, transportation services, special education services, etc.) The "Little Read" project committee, consisting of at least one representative from each of these agency components and a community representative from the local library, met on a bi-weekly basis from September 2012 – March 2013 to plan events around the classic, *Dr. Doolittle* (Lofting, 2006), develop a packet of suggested children's activities for use by staff, and serve as a liaison to their respective agency components.

During January - February 2013, staff members from across disciplines engaged Head Start and Early Head Start children in a range of "Little Read" project activities. Examples include weekly classroom scavenger hunts for Dr. Dolittle clues around the building; bus monitors using Dr. Dolittle character puppets to act out the stories on the bus ride to and from

school; nurses providing large group activities in classrooms on healthy bones based on Dr. Dolittle's animal friends; family advocates delivering Dr. Dolittle books to families and modeling literacy strategies during home visits; nutrition staff collaborating with classroom staff for Dr. Dolittle themed cooking projects; and, two agency-wide family events (movie night for viewing of Dr. Dolittle and a "museum night" for displaying children's work samples made during the six-week project).

As part of this study, agency staff members from across disciplines serving on the "Little Read" project committee were invited to complete a questionnaire and participate in two interviews (pre – and post- "Little Read" project). Participants included the following: nurse; director of special services; director of transportation; staff assistant; assistant Head Start teacher; Head Start teacher; Early Head Start teacher; Early Head Start family advocate; Head Start family advocate; literacy specialist; development specialist; and, the community representative from the local public library. The purpose of the questionnaire and interviews was to explore "Little Read" committee members' experiences during the project and what they perceive to be the benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration.

## MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Participants in this study did highlight themes that are echoed in the research on interdisciplinary collaboration and shed light on some of the benefits and challenges of working across disciplines in comprehensive early childhood programs. First, this study suggests that Head Start and Early Head Start staff recognize the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration. One benefit was the belief that participation in a literacy project with staff members from across disciplines strengthened existing relationships. Another benefit was that interdisciplinary collaboration created new opportunities for the types of discussion that foster additional collaborative efforts. A third benefit of collaborating across disciplines was that it increased staff levels of excitement about literacy and engagement in learning activities as they participated in Dr. Dolittle activities with children in a variety of locations (e.g. buses, hallways, nurses office, transportation office, playground, classrooms, multi-purpose room, etc.), in homes, and at the local library. Across questionnaires and interviews, participants also noted the ways in which this agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project strengthened home-school connections for staff members from every agency component and fostered new understandings of young children's development, particularly among non-classroom staff.

Although participants in this study highlighted some of the benefits to collaborating across disciplines around an agency-wide, literacy project, there were challenges. For the majority of staff, the primary challenge came from trying to fit the added responsibilities that came with project planning and implementation into an already busy day. In spite of the challenge of time and scheduling constraints, participants did highlight the ways in which their participation deepened their appreciation for the project's positive impact on children, families, and staff. Non-classroom staff members from across disciplines noted the ways in which their participation in the "Little Read" project fostered new understandings of young children's learning and development. Classroom staff members described coming to a greater awareness of what young children know and are able to do.

This study also suggests that early childhood staff members from across disciplines are very interested in having additional opportunities to collaborate. Participants described the

important role interdisciplinary collaboration during the "Little Read" project played in helping them realize that by working together across disciplines, they can better support optimal child outcomes. A significant challenge to interdisciplinary collaboration in comprehensive early childhood programs, especially an agency-wide literacy project, is that it is still in the early stages of development. This challenge can be exaggerated in Head Start and Early Head Start programs where it may be viewed as “project specific”, and “add on” to a current role, or where organizational structures such as scheduling difficulties and/or pre-existing staff responsibilities may not fully support it.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In order to more effectively address long-standing challenges to interdisciplinary collaboration in comprehensive early childhood programs, creating opportunities for interprofessional training is essential. As early childhood programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start, seek to improve outcomes for young children using an agency-wide, interdisciplinary approach to literacy initiatives, it is important that all disciplines receive professional development to assist them in developing the attitudes, skills, and dispositions necessary to work more effectively across disciplines. Currently, there is very little information to guide this process for staff members working in education, transportation, health, nutrition, family services, and special services within comprehensive early childhood programs. In order for all staff members to support young children's learning and development in multiple contexts (e.g. classroom, hallway, bus, playground, home, community settings, etc.) it is also important that they receive professional development around integrating literacy with content curricula (math, social studies, science, etc.) and across developmental domains (receptive and expressive language, gross and fine motor skills, cognitive skills, and adaptive skills) using developmentally appropriate practices. In addition to providing targeted professional development, comprehensive early childhood programs must also create opportunities for staff to become engaged in the collaborative process. Greater staff involvement in all aspects of an agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project design, implementation, and evaluation, can substantially improve the collaborative process.

## TIPS FOR PRACTITIONERS

A primary focus of early childhood programs, particularly those that offer comprehensive services, is to improve outcomes for young children and positively impact school readiness (Anderson, Shinn, Scrimshaw, Fielding, Normand, & Carande-Kulis, 2003). As the field advances its understandings of the ways in which interdisciplinary collaboration can help reduce the academic, psycho-social, and health barriers that invariably get in children's way, there are a few considerations for staff currently working in comprehensive early childhood programs. “Tips for practitioners” include:

- **It Takes a Team:** It takes a small group of representatives from across disciplines to guide the project's collaborative process. Successfully planning and implementing an

agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project, takes an interdisciplinary team approach. In order for it to be most successful, it is important to have representation from across disciplines on the project committee serving as liaisons to their respective agency components.

- **Project Timing:** Planning and implementing an agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project may be influenced by a number of variables such as the level of administrative support, agency funding considerations, and other agency initiatives. Therefore, it is important for each component to closely examine the agency calendar before collaboratively determine the best time during the calendar year to implement the project.
- **Duration of the Project:** In addition to determining the best time of year for implementing an agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project, programs will want to consider the duration of the project. It is important to determine early on in the collaborative process what length of time is realistic based on agency resources. For example, an agency with fewer resources(staff time and materials) may want to consider starting the project with a shorter time period (2-3 weeks).
- **Buy-In From Staff:** Staff "buy-in" for an agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project is critical for success. One way to encourage buy-in is to have all staff assist in selecting a book for the project. Although this can be accomplished in a variety of ways, one way is to have the project committee select 3-5 classic pieces of literature that are available in chapter book, leveled readers, and board book formats. This brief list of book choices can be voted on by agency staff during regularly- scheduled departments meetings with the most popular book selected for the project. A book chosen by democratically may generate excitement and "buy-in" for the project.
- **Collaboratively Developed Activity Packets:** Collaboratively developing project activity packets is important for including multiple perspectives. Project activities should align with new learning standards and use developmentally appropriate practices. Since children's learning and development will be supported in multiple contexts during the project, however, it is important that a range of perspectives are considered. Gaining the perspective of staff members from across disciplines while developing the packets ensures that activities are appropriate for a particular settings. For example, objects such as markers or crayons may be appropriate for a classroom setting but considered a possible projectile on the bus, creating a safety hazard.
- **Project Evaluation:** Evaluating an agency-wide, interdisciplinary literacy project takes time, but it well worth it. First, evaluating the project is important for assessing instructional practices. How many project activities integrated literacy with math? science? social studies? How many small group activities integrated expressive and/or receptive language with fine motor skills? gross motor skills ? cognitive skills? adaptive skills? Collecting information from staff across disciplines can help assess the types of instructional practices employed to support young children's learning and development. Secondly, project evaluation project is important for assessing family and community engagement. How many books were distributed to families? How many home visits were conducted by family advocates? How many books were read by families during the project? How many learning strategies were modeled and practiced with families? How many families attended movie night or museum night? How many classrooms went on a field trip to the local library during the project? How

many children and families visited the local library during this same time period? This important information can be gathered from staff using project-specific recording keeping forms and included in monthly and year-end reports.

Finally, project evaluation is important for assessing the collaborative process. To count the number of project activities completed in classrooms provides one picture of the project's success. To assess the number of project activities completed in classrooms, on buses, in homes, in the nurse's office, during related services (OT, PT, Speech) provides a very different picture. However, the collaborative process also includes gathering staff input around benefits, challenges, and areas for improvement. This can be conducted using an end-of-the project survey. In spite of its many benefits, interdisciplinary collaboration presents challenges.

Participants in this study noted the value of interdisciplinary collaboration for supporting optimal outcomes for young children. We also heard about some of the barriers to this involvement. In recognition that no one profession can address the complex needs of many of today's children, it is critical to address these barriers. Greater attention must be given in comprehensive early childhood programs to moving away from an emphasis on discipline-specific training toward creating additional opportunities for interdisciplinary dialog and practice (Weist, Evans & Lever, 2003; Anderson & Bronstein, 2012). Interdisciplinary collaboration can positively impact the delivery of services in early childhood programs (Pollard, Miers & Rickaby, 2012). If we are to achieve positive child outcomes and improve school readiness, engaging early childhood staff members from across disciplines in projects such as the "Little Read" must become the rule, not the exception.

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