

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE

Promoting Partnerships with Parents in Preschool Programs: Does the Number of Classroom Sessions a Day Matter?

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Positive parent-teacher relationships are associated with positive child outcomes (Minke, 2010). Teachers' work contexts, such as the number of children/families each teacher serves each day/week and a teacher's self-efficacy may influence teachers' abilities to build those relationships. Participants in this pilot study included families of children enrolled in publicly-funded preschool programs and their teachers. To assess their perceptions of self-efficacy regarding parent-teacher relationships, preschool teachers completed the Teacher Efficacy for Promoting Partnerships Scale (Moen, Sheridan, & White, 2016). Findings suggest that preschool programs using a single all-day session model with fewer children and families assigned per teacher, may permit teachers to more quickly establish partnerships with parents, or at least establish a confidence in working with parents sooner in the relationship than teachers assigned to teach to double (two half-day) sessions each day.

Keywords: teacher self-efficacy, parent engagement, preschool, early childhood, Head Start, parent-teacher relationships, class size

Each year, approximately four million children enter kindergarten in the United States, and many enter without the level of academic and social skills needed for success in school and social settings. Since 1964, federal dollars have been allocated for Head Start and Early Head Start programs and recently they have been expanded for Early Head Start family childcare programs in an effort to reduce achievement gaps (United States Department of Education, 2015). This trend has increased the need for early childhood teachers to partner with parents in order to provide needed continuity between home and "school" to positively influence young children's development. Furthermore, Head Start Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families [ACF], 2016) recently called for the increase of service duration for center-based Head Start preschool programs from 448 contact

hours to 1020 contact hours with children per year. Prior to these revisions, a Head Start teacher could have two class sessions per day consisting of 17 children each, or a total of 34 children and families. The revised standards could result in a decrease in the number of children to no more than 20 children/families per day per teacher. Extended hours and the possible transition from double session to single session programs would result in fewer children and fewer families with whom each preschool teacher would be expected to build relationships, which could increase the likelihood of more productive partnerships with parents. This pilot study explores this possibility.

Parent engagement in young children's learning is not a new concept to the early childhood education community. Since the late 1960's, the Federal Head Start Act has included parent engagement as an integral element in providing quality services to children and families. More recently, Head Start revisited the role of parent engagement with publication of the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework (PFCE; ACF, 2011). The framework identifies positive parent-teacher relationships as a key element in increasing parent engagement. Similarly, the NAEYC program accreditation standards, stress the importance of parent engagement and parent-teacher relationships, and their Professional Preparation Standards for Teachers (NAEYC, 2010) emphasize the importance of supporting and engaging families and communities through respectful, reciprocal relationships and engaging families and communities in young children's development and learning. Finally, federal amendments for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1986 and again in 2004 also addressed the importance of family-professional partnerships for family-centered services to families with infants and toddlers with disabilities. The law calls for development of Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) to focus practitioners' attention on family needs, the family as the focus for enhancing children's development, and the family as a partner in early intervention programs (IDEA, 2004). Parents and teachers working together has become the standard for high quality early childhood programs.

During the early years of their children's lives, parents begin to form their opinions and shape their behaviors related to the importance of their engagement with their children's teachers. Parent-teacher relationships that include joint goal setting and decision-making, as well as opportunities for frequent conversations between parents and teachers, can significantly increase interpersonal connections between parents and teachers and positive outcomes for young children (Sheridan, Clarke, Knoche, & Edwards, 2006). A teacher's confidence and ability to develop such relationships with parents provides a foundation for consistency between home and school settings and a bridge between home-school differences that can delay or challenge children's learning.

Research studies have identified a variety of key teacher characteristics associated with positive teacher-child and parent-teacher relationships. Teacher education, teaching experience, and their knowledge of child development have proved to be consistent variables (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 2001). Teacher self-efficacy has also surfaced as an important possible factor (Chung, Marvin, & Churchill, 2005; Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Teacher self-efficacy has been defined as the "teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize, execute, and successfully accomplish a specific teaching task" (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 202). A teacher's sensitivity to his or her own strengths and deficits related to their role as a teacher has been identified as an important variable in teacher effectiveness or efficacy (Ross & Bruce, 2007; Woolfork, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990).

Individuals with strong self-efficacy tend to set goals that challenge their current capabilities and tend to have a stronger commitment to the goals that they set (Bandura, 1993).

Class size and teacher-child ratio are two key program factors associated with quality early childhood care and education programs. A smaller class size is often associated with higher quality programs and better outcomes for young children (Reynolds et al., 2014; Sheridan, Williams, & Samuelsson, 2014; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). National organization standards, such as the NAEYC Accreditation Standards for early childhood education programs (2017) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Head Start Performance Standards (2016), provide guidelines for early childhood programs on best practice related to teacher-child ratios for young children in group programs.

A study of childcare program quality and characteristics conducted by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) found that children enrolled in classrooms with lower teacher-child ratios and smaller class sizes exhibited fewer behavior challenges and greater gains in language and cognitive outcomes. Smaller class sizes and lower teacher-child ratios allowed teachers the time needed to engage in supportive interactions and longer conversations with children (NICHD, 2000). However, little can be found regarding the role the number of families served per teacher per day plays on teacher confidence and partnerships with parents. Teacher-child ratios often describe the number of adults and children per classroom. But what if the number of class sessions per teacher is doubled each day? Is it reasonable to suggest that higher enrollment numbers, often served in double session classrooms, and, therefore, higher number of families served per day, may be associated with the time teachers have to build relationships and partner with parents?

STUDY DESCRIPTION

This pilot study explores the impact that the number of preschool class sessions, and, therefore, the total number of children and families teachers serve per day, have on teacher self-efficacy in promoting partnerships with parents. Early childhood education program characteristics, such as number of class sessions per day and teacher self-efficacy, may play important roles in teachers' abilities to enhance needed parent engagement in children's learning and subsequent child outcomes.

The sample for this current study consisted of 263 families of children enrolled for two years in publicly-funded preschool programs and their 110 preschool teachers. The 110 participating teachers served the same children each year in preschool classrooms as part of either single or double session programs. Of the 110 teachers, 60 taught a single session a day serving 10-20 children and families, while 50 teachers taught two half-day classroom sessions enrolling 9-25 children per session, for a total 19-50 children/families across the double sessions.

Teachers completed the Teacher Efficacy for Promoting Partnerships Scale (TEPP) (Moen, Sheridan, & White, 2016), a 20-item questionnaire designed to assess teacher self-perceptions of behaviors that promote positive parent-teacher relationships.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Results from this study suggest that teachers with a single classroom session a day, with lower numbers of children and families served per teacher, may see benefits in their level of confidence for and speed with which teachers establish quality parent-teacher relationships. After one year of building relationships with children and families, teachers with just one preschool session a day reported higher confidence levels on the TEPP scale than did teachers with double sessions each day and maintained this level of confidence into the second year with the same families. The teachers' high confidence levels after one year working with a fewer number of families suggests that single session classrooms provide teachers the time needed for possibly more frequent and or longer interactions with parents at drop-off, pick up times or parent teacher conferences, and home visits.

However, teachers with two classroom sessions a day and twice the number of families to serve showed growth in their confidence in building partnerships with the parents after two years with the same families. Time apparently does play a role in influencing how confident teachers feel about their ability to build partnerships with parents. The time needed to build partnerships with parents however may come more quickly in single session programs with more frequent and or longer interactions between parents and teachers being possible.

This pilot study provides new insight on the value of teachers' self-efficacy in partnering with parents. In addition, the study suggests possible benefits of program design elements related to single session classrooms with fewer children and families served per teacher per day. Programs making decision related to classroom enrollment numbers and or parent-teacher relationship expectations could use findings from this pilot study.

The newly-released Head Start Performance Standards (ACF, 2016) calling for increased duration of services for center-based Head Start children will likely have both positive effects as well as challenges as most changes do for programs. The shift will result in fewer children and families per teacher per day/week/month/year and may increase costs associated with operating additional classrooms needed to maintain current program enrollments. However, fewer class sessions per day and a fewer number of families served per teacher have the potential for increasing the likelihood of positive reciprocal parent-teacher relationships more quickly by possibly increasing the frequency of interactions between parents and teachers per week/month, the amount of time available per interaction at drop-off and pick-up times or during scheduled home visits, conferences or phone calls, and the time available for preparation and follow-up.

Head Start programs and practitioners have the opportunity to lead the early childhood profession through programmatic decisions related to enrollment, staffing, and parent engagement practices. These decisions provide a foundation for the supports that may be needed to effectively build positive parent-teacher relationships, and ultimately increase positive outcomes for Head Start children and their families.

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