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Parent Involvement and Kindergarten Readiness: An Approach for Success

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Abstract

Each year in the United States, thousands of five-year-old children arrive at kindergarten unprepared to achieve the educational goals established by their state boards of education. The calculated costs of school unreadiness to society are staggering. However, comprehensive early childhood and family involvement programs can save society billions as well as provide children with a secure future. Because families serve as children's first and most influential teachers, family members can take the lead in providing children with the experiences they need to succeed in school. We are proposing to address the problem of kindergarten unreadiness with a multifaceted family involvement model. This model would include direct services to children, family involvement in education, and teacher participation in family involvement. Research, however, is required to determine the characteristics of successful pre-kindergarten and family involvement programs, family recruitment and retention strategies, and teacher education and preparation as they apply to kindergarten readiness.

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Introduction

The issue of kindergarten readiness is of urgent concern to parents, practitioners, and policymakers (Bowman & Moore, 2006; Bruner, Floyd, & Frelow, 2005; Loasa & Ainsworth, 2007; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Kindergarten readiness is crucial to children's academic success through high school and beyond. Children who are ready for school are more likely to experience academic success and they are less likely to have school adjustment problems, become delinquent or drop out of high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbarini, 2001).

The Problem

Unready for School.

Each year in the United States, thousands of five-year-old children arrive at kindergarten unprepared to achieve the educational goals established by their state boards of education. In two large national surveys, teachers estimated that one-third (Boyer, 1991) to one-half of children in their classes (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000) did not meet their expectations for kindergarten-readiness. Twenty to fifty percent of young children arrived at school "unprepared to learn" according to a nationwide survey of public schools administrators (Kauffman Early Exchange, 2002). An analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class of 1989-1999 (Wertheimer, Croan, Moore, & Hair, 2003) found that fully 56% of the 2.2 million kindergartners tested lagged behind in one or more of three areas. These areas of "potential vulnerability" -- cognitive achievement, social-emotional development and health (i.e. were in fair/poor health, overweight, behind in their motor skills, or had a disability) -- are intimately linked to kindergarten success or failure (Ackerman, Barnett, & March, 2005). Culture and

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ethnicity are associated with these risk factors; therefore, it is not surprising that greater proportions of African-American and Hispanic children are judged as ill-prepared for kindergarten success (Bowman & Moore, 2006; National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).

High Costs of Being UnReady

The calculated costs of school unreadiness are staggering (Bruner, 2002). Costs to society are associated with child education costs (e.g., special education, grade retention, school dropout), child human service costs (e.g., juvenile delinquency, mental health care), adult human services costs (e.g., adolescent parenting, welfare dependency) as well as lost economic activity. The annual societal costs exceed **$260 billion** annually (Bruner). Conversely, comprehensive early childhood and family involvement programs can save society $2.36 in benefits for every $1.00 of costs (Isaacs, 2007). This means that for every billion invested, society saves over two billion in educational, social services, and economic costs.

However, research is needed to determine the cost-benefit ratio of family involvement programs addressing kindergarten readiness.

Families serve as children's first and most influential teachers. Therefore it follows that family members can take the lead in providing children with the experiences they need to succeed in school. Parent involvement in school predicts the child's first grade reading achievement and later academic success (Snow & Dickinson, 2008).

There are, however, problems associated with the recruitment and retention of parents in family involvement activities. The challenge of parent recruitment is particularly seen among programs targeting minority families (Harachi, Catalano & Hawkins, 2008). For example, traditional methods of recruitment that are effective with mainstream parents tend to be

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inadequate when recruiting Hispanic parents (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Traditional methods like English-only flyers and brochures fail to attract Hispanic participants due to a mismatch between recruitment strategies and the values of this target population. Hispanic families are more likely to be involved in a program when it is recommended through valued personal communication, especially from a trusted leader in the community (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Like most parents, Hispanic parents tend to place high value on involvement in their children's education (Chavkin, 1993). However, if there are cultural barriers between minority parents and schools in the form of language, values and attitudes, their desire to be involved may be inhibited.

Furthermore, effective recruitment strategies do not guarantee that parents will continue to participate in programs designed to improve their educational involvement (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). It is not feasible for them to participate if parents are at work, tending to multiple children, or cooking dinner for their families. Parents will not be motivated to participate if the program is not culturally sensitive or does not fulfill expressed needs.

An Approach for Addressing Kindergarten Unreadiness

The approach we are proposing to address the problem of kindergarten unreadiness is a multifaceted family involvement model. This model includes direct services to children, family involvement in education, and teacher participation in family involvement.

Direct Services to Children

Preparing children for success in kindergarten requires a "whole child" approach according to multiple national surveys (e.g., *Early Learning Standards: Results from a National Survey to Document Trends in State-Level Policies and Practices*, 2007). The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) advocated for a "whole child" or multidimensional approach to kindergarten readiness (NEGP, 1991, 1995). NEGP defined five dimensions of kindergarten

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readiness: 1) physical well-being and motor development 2) social and emotional competence; 3) approaches toward learning style; 4) language and literacy development; and 5) cognition and general knowledge (NEGP, 1991, 1995). Kindergarten readiness experts have advocated for pre-kindergarten curricula which support all five of these domains of development. Research has found that early care and education programs with a multidimensional curriculum better prepared children for kindergarten than those with a narrower curricular approach to early learning (Ackerman & Barnett, 2006; Barnett, 2004; Espinosa, 2002). However, due to the mediocre quality of child care where many pre-kindergarten children spend much of their days, the question of capability arises. Many pre-k programs require support services such as teacher training to achieve a "whole child" approach (Bruner, Floyd, & Copeman, 2005; National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2006).

Research, such as a large experimental study, is needed to compare models of prekindergarten programs which use a "whole child" approach in their curriculum in order to identify the most efficacious approaches.

Family Involvement in Education

Joyce Epstein and colleagues (1997) present a typology that brings together the many important roles and conceptualizations of family involvement in education. Figure 1 shows the framework of the six types of involvement and sample practices with each type of involvement. Because of its breadth, Epstein's (1997) typology is currently the most widely used framework regarding parental school involvement. Both practitioners and researchers have used this typology as the center of their work because it covers so many aspects of parent involvement.

Epstein's work is useful for determining which type or types of parent involvement are predictive of kindergarten readiness. For example, implementing a large experimental study that

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would compare models of parent involvement programs which are addressing kindergarten readiness is needed.

Figure 1: **Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement**

Types	Definition	Examples of Practice
Type 1: Parenting	Help families improve home environment to support the education of children	Home visits, workshops, parent education, meetings
Type 2: Communicating	Design effective forms of communication, including both home-to-school and school-to-home communications	Conferences, translators, report cards, phone calls, newsletters, web pages, brochures
Type 3: Volunteering	Parent help and support	Volunteer programs, resource centers of parents, parent patrols, parents as speakers
Type 4: Learning at Home	Provide information on about how parents can help children with homework and curriculum activities	Provide information on homework policies, calendars with activities, summer learning activities, family interaction with curricula
Type 5: Decision Making	Parents as leaders, representatives, committee members	Active PTA/PTO, advocacy, district level councils, elections, networks
Type 6: Collaborating with Community	Use community resources to strengthen school and family programs	Current information to all families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support programs and service integration with school programs.

Characteristics of Successful Parent Involvement Programs. Effective recruitment and retention strategies are common to successful family involvement programs. Recruitment success is based on the flexibility, sensitivity, perseverance, and creativity of those in charge of recruitment. Effective parent recruitment strategies display cultural competence by taking into consideration the strengths and needs of targeted parents (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

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Successful retention strategies take into consideration the parents' point of view and attempt to make participation feasible and meaningful. Effective program design is a main component of retention in parent involvement. Programs should be flexible in responding to the needs of parents. They should be fun, engaging, and comfortable, and should communicate to parents that they are valued and equal partners in children's educational success (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Retention is also contingent upon the location and scheduling of parent events (Harachi et al., 2008). Scheduling should be determined by an evaluation of parent availability. Providing child care is essential for parent retention. Also, attractive incentives for participation, like food, transportation and gifts, are proven ways to retain participants (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

Determining whether these recruitment and retention strategies would be successful for family involvement programs addressing kindergarten readiness requires further research. For example, research that focuses on identifying components of parent involvement programs that predict kindergarten readiness are needed.

Successful parent involvement programs are culturally relevant (Espinosa, 1995, 2008), include weekly home visits, are least a year in length (Kahn & Moore, 2010), have a minimum of 11 sessions (Mbwana, Terzian, & Moore, 2009), and provide "hands on" opportunities for parents to practice their new skills with their children during the parent education session (Mbwana, Terzian, & Moore, 2009). Topics of a successful parent involvement program are defined by parents in order to facilitate leadership and self-efficacy (Coatsworth, Duncan, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2006). Topics should include the five domains of kindergarten readiness. Also, successful parent involvement programs are built on family strengths rather than perceived family deficits (Mendoza, Katz, Robertson, & Rothenberg, 2003).

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Finally, successful programs are multidisciplinary (Klein, 1990). Family involvement programs would benefit from the expertise of representatives of the fields of Family and Child Development, Social Work, Sociology, Education, Early Childhood Education, Human Nutrition, Psychology, Public Policy, Child Advocacy as well as input from Economists.

Research is needed to determine whether these characteristics of successful parent involvement programs are relevant to parent involvement programs addressing kindergarten readiness.

Teacher Participation in Family Involvement

Educators need specific preparation about the knowledge, attitudes, and skills it takes to enhance the involvement of diverse families in their children's education. The importance of preparing educators to work together with diverse families cannot be overstated; a parent is a child's first teacher and the only teacher who remains with a child throughout his or her education. The research is compelling about both the academic benefits (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and the social-emotional learning benefits (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004) of family involvement in education. When families are involved in their children's learning, children do better in school and in life. Chavkin's 2005 review of the literature on teacher training and parent involvement aptly points out the huge discrepancy between ideal teacher training and the reality of teacher training about parent involvement.

Research still needs to address major questions: What are the best practices in preparing teachers to involve parents that would enhance kindergarten readiness? How should training be adapted to reflect differences such as culture, language, and location?

Studies by Shartrand and her colleagues (1997) and Hiatt-Michael (2001) found few universities required a full course for future teachers on parent involvement, but most included

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the content in modules or practicums. Are there ways that kindergartens or pre-kindergarten programs could work with universities to enhance parent involvement preparation for new teachers? The evidence for increasing educator preparation for school-family involvement is incontrovertible, but we need to know more about what teacher training strategies work best for which populations. Additionally, research is needed to identify best practices in preparing teachers to work with parents.

Summary

To summarize, kindergarten readiness is essential to the future of children, families, and society. We know family and teacher involvement are keys to insuring school success. Research is required to determine the characteristics of successful pre-kindergarten and family involvement programs, family recruitment and retention strategies, and teacher education and preparation as they apply to kindergarten readiness.

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