

Early Education Commission

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United Way of
Metropolitan Atlanta

Research Abstract

- Title:** “Classroom Quality and Time Allocation in Tulsa’s Early Childhood Programs,” a paper presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development
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Written and presented by three researchers from Georgetown University, this 50-page paper is the first report from 2006 data on the Tulsa Pre-K program. The program, which was established in 1998, is recognized across the country for several reasons. First, it reaches more four-year-olds than any other program in the U.S. Secondly, it utilizes a rigorous set of classroom quality standards. Under state law, pre-K teachers must have bachelor’s degrees with a teaching certificate in early childhood education. They must also receive mandated training in math and reading. Finally, all classes must maintain a 10/1 child/staff ratio.

These researchers were not new to the Oklahoma universal pre-K (UPK) setting, having documented substantial learning gains among four-year-olds there following research in 2001 and 2003. In this newest wave of data collection (2006), a group of specially-trained observers visited 78 Tulsa Public Schools pre-K classrooms and 28 Head Start classrooms. Both are funded by the state of Oklahoma under its UPK system.

In addition to data on teacher characteristics obtained through a teacher survey, the observers used two observational instruments in the classrooms. The data which was obtained positively correlated across the board for both of these instruments:

- the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System or CLASS* (an assessment of classroom quality that encompasses instructional quality, emotional support and classroom organization), and
- the *Child Engagement section of the Emerging Academics Snapshot* (which provides detailed information on the time children spend engaged in specific academic activities, such as reading and pre-reading activities, expressive language development, math, science and social studies).

Local vs. local - and - local vs. national comparisons

First, researchers compared data within Tulsa, then they compared Tulsa to national statistics, where available. Between Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) and Head Start, the researchers found striking differences in the amount of classroom time allocated to various activities (ie: practicing letters and sounds vs. math engagement), but very similar results in the amount of time given to overall instructional support, emotional support and classroom management.

In a national comparison, it was found that TPS pre-K teachers devote much more time to key language and literacy activities than their national pre-K counterparts – almost twice as much time reading and three times as much time practicing letters and sounds. They also spent more time on math and science. The Tulsa Head Start program scored significantly higher than the national Head Start sample on three of four instructional support dimensions.

Overall, the researchers suggest that the differences between the Tulsa programs (public school vs. Head Start), while statistically significant, do not indicate that the experience for the children is anything less than high quality in either of the programs. They contrast the fact that the Head Start children are somewhat less exposed to pre-literacy and pre-math activities, but they are somewhat more exposed to social studies and fantasy play. The quality of instructional and emotional support in both is virtually identical.

What the findings suggest

The researchers suggest that “the critical question for policy purposes concerns how to produce the kinds of pre-K classrooms that generate learning gains.” They examined the associations between classroom quality and teacher characteristics as well as curriculum choices.

The findings within Tulsa suggest that teacher experience and use of “highly structured learning sequences” support better classroom management and emphasis on pre-literacy activities. As an aside, Spanish-speaking teachers were reported to have more supportive, respectful and flexible classroom environments. Further research is proposed on these aspects of the findings. Both the pre-K and Head Start programs, however, have several things in common:

- teachers with a B.A. degree,
- teachers who are early childhood certified, and
- teachers who are relatively well-paid.

On the Tulsa vs. national comparisons, the researchers concluded that the Tulsa pre-K program is producing substantial learning gains because the quality of instructional support is higher than elsewhere (three points above) and teachers are devoting more time to pre-reading and pre-math skills than their counterparts in other jurisdictions.

Numerous charts and an extensive reference bibliography are included at the end of the report.

Link to full text of article (select “Download” in box on website):

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