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## **Study of Best Practices in Early Childhood Education**

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**Research structure:** Throughout the project, we worked to understand the varieties of teaching and learning practices which encompassed high quality child care. This study was an ecological approach to understanding the growth and development of minority children and their families within the context of childcare. The goal was to remain conscious of value and belief systems across class, race, ethnicity and culture.

The project was designed to describe practices in child care programs that both community members and researchers identified as exemplary. During the first phases, the research team identified an advisory board of community members active in the Los Angeles child care community. The advisory board, the research staff, and additional community members identified sites that served primarily low income children of color, and represented exemplary practices. The advisory board and the research staff selected 10 sites from those nominated. The same process was followed in North Carolina to select 6 sites. Researchers in both states then carefully observed programs and interviewed staff in the chosen sites.

Sites were visited on multiple occasions for observation of the quality of the environment, adult child interactions, and instructional practices. As part of the on-site observational assessment, both the experiences of individual children in the program and a more global view of the classroom environment were documented. Staff was interviewed to enrich and enhance our understanding of the philosophies of the individual programs. Focus groups were conducted for researchers to compile multiple perspectives, and for program teachers and directors to communicate about one another's practices.

As the project progressed, long-term outcomes at the 10 LA sites were assessed by following 72 individual children into the learning environments into which they moved after completing preschool.

We also added 10 new sites to the study in a segment entitled the "Partnership Project." The directors from the original 10 LA sites, and the Advisory Board chose the partnership sites. The criteria for selection were demographics and geographic location similar to the original sites, and willingness by the director and staff to engage in a year of inquiry about their practice and philosophy.

The first objective of this project was to determine, in the context of developing positive relationships between researchers and practitioners, whether unique practices of the original Best Practices sites could be learned and utilized by new sites. The second objective was to reduce barriers that traditionally prevent researchers and teachers from benefiting from one another's expertise.

## Research questions

### *Best Practices Programs:*

- What are alternative pathways to adequate teacher training, and what specific skills are correlated with their training?
- How do teachers view the parents of the children with whom they work and how does this correlate with how the program responds to them?
- How do teachers see themselves and their work in the context of the communities in which they live and work?
- How do children's activities differ given the different goals or structure of each program?
- How are attachment relationships between children and caregivers, and specific behaviors associated?
- From preschool to kindergarten, how do young children who have received quality early care compare to peers with different (i.e., lower quality) early experiences?

*Longitudinal Study:* How do the elementary classrooms in which Best Practices children continue their education compare to the quality early care centers from which they were recruited?

### *Partnership Study*

- How does the feedback loop of "observation-data feedback-ongoing supervision" support professional development efforts in early childhood classrooms?
- What teacher behaviors changed, and what new information was integrated into program planning and implementation as a result of efforts to transmit "best practices" into new programs?

**Benefits of research:** The Best Practices Study employed constituents at 2 different levels and times. We reached out primarily to practitioners, and local policy makers. First, 8 members of a project Advisory Board represented the professional development, inclusion and regulatory expertise of the local community and helped identify the study sites, developed the research questions and provided on-going advice. The board met quarterly or as needed for the four years of the study.

At the heart of the Best Practices research project was the intentional construction of trusting relationships between the researchers and the immediate study constituents, the approximately 80 participants/subjects who were the teachers and directors of the child care centers. Regular, respectful and sustained contact enabled the researchers to both collect data and, in partnership with participants, engage in dialogue about program practices and possible changes that could enhance the experience of young children in their care.

Researchers supported this relationship with activities such as financially supporting teachers' and directors' expertise and time, holding a reception honoring the work of the child care programs, creating opportunities for the program staff to meet one another and network and by creating a brochure highlighting the sites. Specific activities and structures were developed to sustain and define the exchange of information between researchers and constituents.

The subsequent Partnership Study explored application of this process in a new cohort of childcare programs as an intervention to develop researcher/practitioner partners engaged in inquiry about how to improve child outcomes. The relationship between the researchers and the subjects of the study was intentionally redefined to broaden the researcher role to one of partner and supporter and the subject role to include contributor. A regular feedback loop was created between the "research partners" (NCEDL staff) and the entire staff of the child care program about study findings and data. The program staff helped interpret the data, plan for next steps, and commented upon and in some cases learned to use measurement instruments.

- Regular Focus groups for teachers were held for the purpose of discussing practice, as well as the study itself. In some instances, there were one-time meetings for parents to discuss study findings and the implications for the program. One outcome was the discovery of the need to include directors more and a focus group was created for them.
- The constituent/participants group was invited to both participate in and attend the Best Practices Synthesis Conference. Staff from each site was either facilitators or paper discussants for small groups throughout the two days. Each person was paid for her/his work. Additionally, scholarships were offered to two staff from each of the programs, and programs sent additional staff at the center's expense. An additional support for the constituents was the presence of a translator so that there was simultaneous translation of the proceedings for Spanish-speaking participants.
- Research staff participated in local, statewide and national conferences and presentations where both the process and the data content was shared with a wide variety of audiences.

**Research findings:** Our initial work on the case studies suggests that there are a finite set of practices that these programs use to extend child care quality. Major differences emerged between California and North Carolina sites, between ethnocentric African-American programs and ethnocentric Latino programs, and between programs defining their mission as community building versus early childhood education. It is important to note that all of these practices are good practices in that they are beneficial to children but some subset of these practices may better fit some programs than others.

Other findings include:

- Different goals of the preschools are significantly correlated with specific classroom activities.
- High involvement of the teachers with children in the classroom can be predicted by their investment in their own community, being mentored and being supervised.
- Engaging children in language play could be predicted by formal education and being supervised. Providing language arts activities could be predicted by formal education, being mentored and being supervised.
- Under-represented children recruited from high quality care centers significantly outperformed their peers enrolled in low quality care centers on measures of vocabulary and reading skills.

**Policy, practice, or professional development implications:** Development of the notion of partnerships between practitioners and researchers as a professional development strategy. Best practices include:

- the necessity for programs to develop a program philosophy that emphasizes the practices that are most important to them
- the need to devise systems that prioritize time for communication and reflection to ensure consistency with program beliefs and to grow through the regular refinement of the program philosophy

- the understanding that no one program can provide everything, but deciding on priorities, as well as adhering to standard quality expectations will result in a program that provides a positive experience for children
- the notion that quality can be defined in multiple ways

**Journal articles:**

Howes, C. (1997). Children's experiences in center based child care as a function of teacher background and adult:child ratio. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 43, 404-425.

Howes, C. (2000). Social-emotional classroom climate in childcare, child-teacher relationships and children's second grade peer relations. *Social Development*, 9(2), 191-204.

Howes, C., Phillipsen, L. C., & Peisner-Feinberg, E. (2000). The consistency of perceived teacher-child relationships between preschool and kindergarten. *Journal of School Psychology*, 38, 113-132.

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