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Child-Initiated Learning Activities for Young Children Living in Poverty

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Should Head Start and other preschool programs for young children living in poverty center on teacher-directed, large-group academic lessons or on teacher-supported, child-initiated learning activities? The concerns reflected in this long-standing debate are that an exclusively teacher-directed approach fails to encourage children's social and emotional development and creativity, while an approach based exclusively on child-initiated activities may not sufficiently stimulate poor children's academic development. These concerns are echoed today in the struggle of early childhood educators to cope with academic-learning mandates that conflict with their own child-centered dispositions, particularly in school districts that have been less successful in helping children achieve academic success. This Digest discusses the findings of empirical studies on teacher-directed and child-initiated preschool programs.

Long-term Preschool Curriculum Comparison Studies

Three long-term preschool curriculum comparison studies began in the 1970s—the High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), the Louisville Head Start Study (Miller & Bizzell, 1983), and the University of Illinois Study (Karnes, Schwedel, & Williams, 1983). All three included the Direct Instruction model—which offered scripted, teacher-directed academic instruction—and a Nursery School model, in which children initiated their own learning activities with minimal teacher support. The High/Scope study included the High/Scope model, in which children initiated learning activities with substantial teacher support. The Louisville and Illinois studies included several additional teacher-directed models and the Montessori model, which encouraged child-initiated activities with didactic materials.

These three studies found that children in Direct Instruction programs intellectually outperformed children in child-initiated-activities programs during and up to a year after the preschool program, but not thereafter. In the Louisville study, the Nursery School children showed higher verbal-social participation and increased more in ambition and aggressiveness than did the Direct Instruction children, but both groups scored lower than their peers on inventiveness. In the Illinois study, 78% of the Nursery School group, but only 48% of the Direct Instruction group and 47% of the no-program group graduated from high school.

In the High/Scope study, the child-initiated-activities groups significantly surpassed the Direct Instruction group on 10 early adult outcomes, more than were found throughout their childhoods. Compared to the Direct Instruction group, both High/Scope and Nursery School groups had fewer members treated for emotional impairment or disturbance (6% vs. 6% vs. 47%) and more who engaged in volunteer work (43% vs. 44% vs. 11%). Compared to the Direct Instruction group, the High/Scope group had fewer members ever arrested for a felony (10% vs. 39%), ever arrested for a property crime (0% vs. 38%), reporting 10 or more acts of misconduct (23% vs. 56%), and identifying people who gave them a hard time (36% vs. 69%); and more members married and living with their spouses (31% vs. 0%) and planning to graduate from college (70% vs. 36%). Compared to the Direct Instruction group, the Nursery School group had fewer members arrested for a felony at ages 22-23 (9% vs. 34%) and ever suspended from work (0% vs. 27%).

Planned Variation Head Start and Follow Through

The national evaluation of Planned Variation Head Start (1969-72), included some 6,000 children at 37 sites (Datta, McHale, & Mitchell, 1976). Its dozen models included the Direct Instruction model and at least two child-initiated-activities models—the High/Scope model and the Enabler model guided by local early childhood consultants. Despite the many design problems associated with a study of this size, two findings distinguished certain program groups from the other program and comparison groups:

- Teacher-directed groups had the highest scores on the achievement tests given at the end of the preschool program.
- The High/Scope group had the greatest IQ gains—23 points compared to no more than 5 points for any of the other groups.

The Follow Through Project (1967-95) was designed to follow through on Head Start by providing similar services from kindergarten through third grade. It never served more than a small fraction of the nation's children who attended Head Start, but did support the development of 20 early elementary curriculum models. A national evaluation found that although program outcomes varied more by site than by curriculum model, Direct Instruction students did significantly better than their peers in regular classes—and better than students in classes based on child-initiated learning activities—on school achievement, self-esteem, and achievement responsibility (Kennedy, 1978). Further, in a few communities, Direct Instruction researchers found evidence that some Direct Instruction students had higher ninth-grade achievement-test scores, a higher high school graduation rate than their peers, and fewer grade repetitions and absences from school (Gersten & Keating, 1987). Direct Instruction's greater success in elementary school than in preschool may have been partly because elementary-school children were better able than preschoolers to adhere to its strict rules of behavior and principles of mastery learning, and partly because elementary-school teachers more fully embraced its methods than did preschool teachers.

Recent Short-term Preschool Studies

Six early childhood curriculum comparison studies have been conducted in the past decade: one study contrasting High/Scope classes with non-High/Scope classes, and five studies contrasting developmentally appropriate practice emphasizing child-initiated activities and developmentally inappropriate practice emphasizing teacher-directed lessons (Dunn & Kontos, 1997).

In the Training for Quality study, Epstein (1993) found that observers rated preschool classes with High/Scope-trained teachers significantly higher than preschool classes whose teachers were not trained by High/Scope. High/Scope training enabled children to plan, carry out, and review their own activities, and it helped teachers use adult-child interaction to promote children's reasoning and language skills. Observers scored children in the High/Scope classes significantly higher at the end of the school year in initiative, social relations, music and movement skills, and overall development.

Burts et al. (1992) have engaged in a program of research based on assessing teachers' developmentally appropriate beliefs and practices and related child outcomes. They found that kindergarten children in developmentally inappropriate classes exhibited significantly more stress behaviors (such as complaints of feeling sick, stuttering, fights, tremors, nervous laughter, and nail biting) than did those in developmentally appropriate classes, particularly males and African-American children.

DeVries and her associates closely observed three kindergarten classes using Direct Instruction, a constructivist approach based on child-initiated activities, and an eclectic approach. Analyzing two game-like activities, they found that the children from the constructivist class were more interpersonally interactive, with a greater number and variety of negotiation strategies and shared experiences, than children from the other two classes (DeVries, Reese-Learned, & Morgan, 1991). Although the Direct Instruction class began kindergarten with significantly higher achievement test scores than the constructivist class, the significant differences between the two classes disappeared by third grade.

Marcon (1992) identified three preschool models operated in the Washington, DC, public schools—teacher-directed, child-initiated, and "middle-of-the-road"—and examined the development of a random sample of 295 children attending these types of programs. Children from child-initiated classes showed the greatest mastery of basic reading, language, and mathematics skills, followed by children from teacher-directed classes, then children from "middle-of-the-road" classes (Marcon, 1992). At fourth grade, this same ranking of curriculum types appeared on children's grade point averages, overall and in most subject matter areas.

Similarly, in detailed observations of 62 preschool and kindergarten classes in the Los Angeles area, Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, and Milburn (1992) found three types of programs—didactic, academic programs in a negative social context; child-initiated-activities programs de-emphasizing academics in a positive social context; and intermediate programs between these two extremes. They found no examples of didactic, academic programs in a positive social context.

In the Academic Environments study, Hirsh-Pasek, Hyson, and Rescorla (1990) studied 90 4- and 5-year-olds in a variety of academic and child-initiated preschool programs in affluent areas in Philadelphia and Delaware and followed up 56 of them through the end of kindergarten. Preschool program type had no significant influence on children's academic or logical skills at the end of kindergarten.

The relevant evidence from these studies suggests that preschool programs based on child-initiated learning activities contribute to children's short- and long-term academic and social development, while preschool programs based on teacher-directed lessons obtain a short-term advantage in children's academic development by sacrificing a long-term contribution to their social and emotional development. On this basis, research supports the use by preschool programs of a curriculum approach based on child-initiated learning activities rather than one based on teacher-directed lessons.

For More Information

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