New State Preschool Yearbook Results
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Why 3-Year-Olds Belong in Pre-K
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How Do We Spell Respect?

NIEER has tracked the progress of state-funded preschool education for several years. With each issue of the State Preschool Yearbook, we gather a fuller picture of how and where growth in preschool education is occurring. (See page 3.)

While no single trend fully represents what’s occurring in the states, it is beginning to look like there is a strong and pervasive socio-political undercurrent affecting all, or nearly all, the states: Preschool education has yet to be accorded the respect it deserves.

When we issued the first Yearbook for 2001-2002, we said that state preschool programs were failing the nation’s children. Five years later, we find improvements, but not enough to alter that original assessment. One problem is an astonishing disconnect between rising enrollment and the allocation of funds required to deliver quality services to the kids.

Although there has been double-digit growth in enrollment in recent years, it has been accompanied by a troubling decline in per-child spending. After adjusting for inflation, the national average of $3,482 per child for 2005-06 is the lowest per-child funding level for state pre-K since NIEER began tracking it. Equally startling is this fact: for every state where real per-child funding rose in 2005-06, there were two where it declined.

It’s important to note this occurred during a period when most state budgets have recovered from their post-Sept. 11 deficits to a sounder financial footing. During that same period, inflation has raised the cost of providing preschool education by at least 15 percent.

Clearly, many policy leaders continue to treat the funding of preschool education as if it were not really essential. This might or might not work in Higher Education where parents have 18 years to save and public programs charge increasingly steep tuition and fees. However, persistently underfunding state pre-K is likely to turn it into mere babysitting, undermining the quality that is necessary to make pre-K a sound investment.

Nowhere is this more evident than Florida where the new state program served over 100,000 children in its first year of operation. While Florida is to be congratulated for making such rapid progress on enrollment, we have to ask what children are being enrolled in. At the $2,500 per child paid by the state, providers can’t afford highly qualified teachers, nor does the state require them. How long Florida voters, who went around their legislature to mandate high quality preschool education in the first place, will put up with what is at best a bad case of wishful thinking will be telling.

To be sure, the rapid growth in access to state-funded pre-K suggests a growing awareness among policymakers and the public of preschool education’s importance. Even Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke’s recent remarks recognized the high returns high quality early childhood education could pay to the economy.

However, until politicians are willing to back up their expansions of enrollment with the funds and other supports needed to make the programs effective, the payoff to our children and nation will remain in doubt.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER is one component of a larger early education initiative designed, funded and managed by The Pew Charitable Trusts.
2006 State Preschool Yearbook Shows New Highs, a New Low

Decline in Per-Child Spending Accompanies Big Jump in Enrollment After Years of Languishing, Quality Standards are on the Move

Anyone digesting the results from NIEER’s newly released 2006 State Preschool Yearbook can hardly be blamed for feeling like they just stepped off a roller coaster. The growth in access to state-funded preschool education documented in recent yearbooks took off in 2005-2006, posting a steep climb of 18 percent in just one year. What’s more, the majority of that rise came by way of a single state. Florida enrolled more than 100,000 children in its new VPK program in its first year of operation.

That feat and incremental increases in other states push the total enrollment in the 38 states with pre-K programs to 942,766 children served, raising the expectation that the one-million-child mark may have been reached in 2006-2007. State-funded pre-K is now the largest provider of public preschool education programs.

Look at funding, however, and many states take a dive by failing to match increased enrollments and the effects of inflation with increased funding. For every state that increased funding per child, there were two that permitted per-child spending to drop in real terms. As a result, the national average of funding per child fell to the lowest level since NIEER began collecting such data in 2000-2001.

On quality issues, the data turn back toward positive territory. Sixteen states raised their quality standards sufficiently to meet NIEER benchmarks they had not previously met and some of them raised more than one benchmark. For the first time, two states met all 10 of the NIEER benchmarks for state standards—Alabama and North Carolina.

Hidden behind the national picture is tremendous variation among states. Access to state pre-K ranges from universally available to nonexistent, quality standards from excellent to poor, and funding varies by several orders of magnitude. Oklahoma continues to lead the nation as the only state to close in on universal enrollment, and it does so with high standards. In addition, evaluations of Oklahoma’s pre-K program provide evidence that it results in positive outcomes for the children who attend.

Of the 942,766 children attending state programs in 2005-2006, some 805,807 were age 4. That means state preschool education now serves 20 percent of the 4-year-old population. This raises the concern that 3-year-olds are being overlooked in some states. Only 26 of the 38 states with programs offer pre-K to 3-year-olds. Only five states serve more than 10 percent of them. Despite numerous studies showing the benefits of more than one year of preschool education, state pre-K is largely a program for 4-year-olds.

While Alabama and North Carolina achieved perfect scores of 10 quality benchmarks, five others achieved nine of the 10. At the other extreme, 10 states failed to meet at least half of the benchmarks.

While average spending per child decreased, total funding for state pre-K increased by $380 million, or 13 percent before adjusting for inflation. Florida’s new program contributed more than half of that increase. States spent an average of $3,482 per child on their preschool education programs in 2005-2006. The decline in per-child expenditure can be attributed to: (1) increases in enrollment that outrun increases in funding and (2) inflation.

“States face a constant temptation to increase the number of children served without a proportionate increase in expenditure,” says NIEER Director Steve Barnett. “This is a concern because when enrollment outpaces funding, states run the risk that effectiveness will deteriorate.” He says inflation can have equally insidious effects, especially since inflation in the state and local government sector of the economy runs about twice as high as in the overall economy. Since 2001-2002, inflation-adjusted state pre-K funding per child has declined by more than 15 percent, Barnett says. The Yearbook can be found on the web at www.nieer.org/yearbook.
Here Come the 3-Year-Olds!

Leading States are Taking a Fresh Look at Public Pre-K for 3-Year-Olds
But One Size Doesn’t Fit All in Mixed-Age Classrooms

One need not spend a lot of time with research like the Perry Preschool Project, Abecedarian or Chicago Child-Parent Center studies to understand that starting children early in preschool education produces the best results, whether one measures success by achievement in school or in life. Yet most of the growth in state-funded preschool education has occurred in programs for 4-year-olds. That worries experts like Yale University Professor Emeritus and Head Start co-founder Edward Zigler. “Preschool education should take in all ages prior to kindergarten,” he says, “but at the very least, it should serve 3- and 4-year-olds.”

That thought isn’t lost on policymakers in states like New Jersey, Vermont, Illinois and Arkansas, where the population of 3-year-olds served has grown in recent years.

Illinois, which ranks third in the nation in serving 3-year-olds through state pre-K, is about to swing the pre-K doors open wider to this age group. The state is ramping up to serve all 3-year-olds deemed to be at risk of school failure as part of Governor Rod Blagojevich’s new Pre-school for All program.

Oklahoma, with its sterling reputation for providing preschool education for all 4-year-olds whose parents want them to attend, is now focusing on 3-year-olds as well. Governor Brad Henry has called for a pilot program for 3-year-olds. At press time, Henry had yet to garner sufficient support in the legislature to make his plan a reality.

In New Jersey, long ranked first in the nation in percentage of its 3-year-olds served, expanded access for this age group could be in the offing if Governor Jon Corzine and the legislature act on recommendations to extend the Abbott Preschool Program to districts not previously eligible.

With more 3-year-olds heading to pre-K, it would be useful to have a robust body of research literature addressing teaching 3-year-olds in pre-K. Not much exists despite the substantial differences in developmental areas like vocabulary, attention span, motor skills and self-regulation that exist between 3- and 4-year-old children. While the two ages are often grouped together in the classroom, experts say developing programs that address the needs of each is anything but a one-size-fits-all proposition.

Few in early childhood education are as involved with integrating 3-year-olds into public pre-K as Barbara Bowman, well-known early childhood professor and co-founder of Chicago’s Erikson Institute. She served on the council advising Illinois Governor Blagojevich on his new plan and also serves as the chief officer of the Chicago...
Public Schools’ early childhood education programs. That means Bowman is up to her elbows in implementing the program to serve all the Windy City’s 3-year-olds deemed at risk of school failure.

Like Zigler, she is a true believer in the ability of 3-year-olds to profit from early education. “Three-year-olds can go to pre-K in any setting where 4-year-olds can go—whether it’s center-based care, nursery school or the public schools,” she says. Then she emphatically adds this qualifier: “So long as the program has been developed to address their needs.”

**Developing Programs**

By that Bowman means programs must be tailored to recognize 3-year-olds as not so far along in their development. She uses early literacy as an example. “Every day there have to be stories selected specifically for 3-year-olds, keeping in mind the kind of story and number of words they can understand.” It’s also critical to expend the extra effort required to socialize 3-year-olds in the pre-K setting, something that may require parents stay in the classroom longer until children feel comfortable and managing the potential for self-centered behaviors that are not atypical in children 3 years of age.

Bowman, who, like Zigler, serves on NIEER’s scientific advisory board, says as the Preschool for All office in the New Jersey Department of Education was responsible for implementing the Abbott Program, also believes mixed-age classrooms can benefit both age groups. “But,” she says, “you have to do it right and that takes qualified teachers with a strong support system.

“I often remind educators that even if you had a class of children born on exactly the same day, it would not be appropriate to teach them all the same thing in the same way. Ellen Frede

### Potential Problems

There’s a potential downside, however. “The problem we have traditionally had with mixed-age classes is that doing it right requires an enormous amount of planning,” Bowman says. One reason is teachers must have a story every day for the 3-year-olds and also one for the 4-year-olds. While the older kids enjoy the story for the younger children, it falls far short of challenging them. Teachers in mixed-age classrooms also have to plan efficiently so they can interact with each child in each age group during the course of the session. Bowman says too often, teachers in mixed-age classrooms end up teaching “to the lowest common denominator.”

Mixed-age classrooms are well-established in New Jersey’s Abbott Preschool Program. Ellen Frede, whose office in the New Jersey Department of Education was responsible for implementing the Abbott Program, also believes mixed-age classrooms can benefit both age groups. “But,” she says, “you have to do it right and that takes qualified teachers with a strong support system.

“I often remind educators that even if you had a class of children born on exactly the same day, it would not be appropriate to teach them all the same thing in the same way. So why do we think a class of 3- and 4-year-olds mixed together is so much more challenging? I think it actually forces teachers to think about individual needs and interests. Mixed-age grouping also allows programs to implement looping and that gives the children and teachers the gift of two years together,” Frede says. Looping is the practice of having teachers keep some or all of the same children from one year to the next.

Since leaving state government and resuming her faculty position at The College of New Jersey, Frede has assumed the role of NIEER’s co-director. Under her leadership, NIEER researchers, many with teaching experience, study pre-K classroom effectiveness and education outcomes in New Jersey and other states. Like Bowman, Frede sees the challenge not only as a researcher and former teacher, but also as an implementer of policy.

### Whole-Child Focus

It’s all part of the whole-child focus—an approach that also makes inclusion of children with disabilities easier. Frede says including 3-year-olds was also challenging because some inexperienced and poorly prepared teachers wanted to try to teach them all the skills that kindergarteners or even first graders should be learning. “That’s harmful for 4s but it’s hideous for 3s. We actually observed a teacher in the first year trying to teach a group of 3-year-olds the silent e rule,” she recalls. “YIKES!”

There were also issues with facilities and equipment being the right size, toilet training and parents who believed their child was too young. “Overall, it has been a big success though and these small issues are well worth resolving when we see these great results,” Frede concludes.

Someone who has experienced the challenges “up close and personal” is Frede’s colleague and NIEER research

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6 »»
associate Amanda Colon. She’s a veteran New Jersey pre-K teacher who sees the dynamics from the perspective of her five years in mixed-age classrooms and as a researcher evaluating programs. She says small-group time can be especially challenging in mixed-age classrooms because it’s important to scaffold learning for children at all levels.

“It takes planning to make sure you’re reaching both the 3s and 4s,” she says. Colon provides this example: “Let’s say you’re playing with counting bears, which come in various sizes and colors. It might be appropriate to encourage 4-year-olds to count them and compare groups to see if they have more of one color or size. For the 3-year-olds, this can be overwhelming. They might, however, enjoy and benefit from lining up their bears by color or size. They can then use one-to-one correspondence (lining up one blue bear next to one red bear until they run out) to figure out if they have more blue or red bears. One-to-one correspondence is a skill that leads to counting.”

She says without proper training in early childhood education, many teachers wouldn’t know how these skills develop. “Contrary to what some may think it’s not appropriate to simply take what is done in kindergarten or first grade and scale it down for 3-year-olds,” she adds. However, by the end of the first year she observed an interesting dynamic: “While the older children were able to help the younger ones with things like zipping coats or tying shoes, the younger kids at times were helping with translations if an older child was having difficulty with language.” That’s when Figueras became a believer in the idea that the combination mixed-age and dual language classroom could become, in her words, “a unique learning community where all the children could feel they had a role to play.” If New Jersey and Illinois are any example, it’s an idea whose time has come.

![Image of Amanda Colon](image_url)

Contrary to what some may think it’s not appropriate to simply take what is done in kindergarten or first grade and scale it down for 3-year-olds.

Amanda Colon

Top 10 States Serving 3-Year-Olds in State-Funded Pre-K

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Related Reading

A Primer on Bilingualism in Education

Teaching and Learning
in Two Languages
Bilingualism and Schooling
in the United States
Eugene E. Garcia, 2005
New York: Teachers College Press
216 pp., ISBN 0-80724536-7, $29.95

America has yet to successfully cope with the fact that our classrooms are experiencing the largest influx of immigrant children since the great migrations that powered the industrial revolution in the last century.

Despite warnings from economists that today’s immigrant children are no less important to America’s future prosperity than the generations that preceded them, they are entering K-12 education poorly prepared to learn and failing to graduate high school and college at far higher rates than youngsters for whom English is their first language.

Numerous factors contribute to this problem, but only one lies at the very heart of it—language and the culture with which it is associated. Teaching and Learning in Two Languages, written by Arizona State University professor Eugene E. Garcia as part of the Multicultural Education Series, conducts a fresh and authoritative examination of the range of issues involved in educating English Language Learners (ELL) in America today.

Garcia is Vice President for University–School Partnerships at Arizona State University. He served as director of the Office of Bilingual Education at the U.S. Department of Education during the Clinton Administration. The current volume, published in 2005, follows his 2001 book Hispanic Education in the United States and in many ways extends his premise in that work to other cultural and linguistic groups.

Readers not versed in issues of bilingualism in education will find Garcia’s depiction of bilingual education and multiculturalism to be accessible, nuanced and research-based. He explains in easily understood terms the theory and research on second language teaching and learning and provides examples of successful programs along the way.

As in his previous writings, Garcia approaches the issue from the perspective that language and cultural diversity in the U.S. are, in his words, “a resource that must be considered if the broader goal of educational success coupled with social success is to be a reality for bilingual students.”

At the outset the circumstances of bilingual children are cast in the broad context of demographic and social trends that may surprise many for the rapidity with which they are unfolding. Minority enrollment as a proportion of total enrollment in elementary and secondary education has risen from 24 percent in 1976 to more than 40 percent today. As a proportion of total enrollment, Hispanics have increased from 6.4 percent to more than 12 percent. That trend is continuing apace, with white, American students predicted to become a minority in about three decades.

Language and Development

He develops early on the linchpin argument that many English-only speakers in and out of education have yet to fully appreciate—that linguistic, cognitive and social development are interrelated and proceeding simultaneously. Bilingualism is not simply the sum of two languages but a more complex process in which cognitive and even social factors operate within the structural aspects of language.

The book serves as an engaging primer on schooling theories and practices in bilingual settings as well as optimal instruction and learning features that have been shown to work. Garcia explains promising new approaches such as dual language programs that aim to create bilingual, bicultural students by instructing both ELL and English-speaking students in a second language without sacrificing learning outcomes.

His policy analysis takes us from the landmark 1974 Supreme Court Lau v. Nichols ruling establishing the language-support rights for language-minority students to subsequent court rulings that affected those rights and then to local, state and federal policies, including the Bilingual Education Act, and its reauthorization. Garcia also addresses negative implications for bilingual education that resulted from the elimination of Title VII, which distributed funds for bilingual education before the federal No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2002.

Teaching and Learning in Two Languages is anything but ponderous. Garcia teaches by example and manages to cover a lot of territory in about 200 pages. Beyond the dry statistics is anecdotal evidence, not least of which is a riveting letter from a Los Angeles high school teacher to a former colleague. It speaks volumes about the state of our schools today. As with his previous works, Garcia brings a personal touch—one forged working in the fields with his Mexican immigrant parents.
Joining the ranks of fellow Midwestern states like Oklahoma and Illinois, Iowa has launched a plan to make preschool universally available to all the state’s 4-year-olds.

A proposal under consideration of the state legislature aims to provide high-quality preschool education programs to 90 percent of 4-year-olds by 2012. Under the current state preschool initiative, Shared Visions, only children from low-income families or those at-risk for school failure qualify for state-funded preschool.

The proposed legislation will house the state preschool program at both public and private schools but, regardless of setting, schools must have a licensed teacher, meet state standards, and operate at least 10 hours a week in order to qualify for state funds. Estimated costs for the program would range from $15 million in 2007-2008 to $87.3 million by 2012-2013, when experts predict the state will have 90 percent of Iowa’s 4-year-olds enrolled in state pre-K. Funding would be based on a per-pupil formula similar to the one used for K-12 spending.

If the legislation, which at press time was in subcommittee is approved, Iowa would become a nationwide leader in providing preschool to all 4-year-olds. Oklahoma, the state currently providing the most access to state-funded preschool education programs, serves 70 percent of its 4-year-olds—20 percent less than what Iowa hopes to serve.

Iowa’s Shared Visions initiative meets five out of 10 benchmarks for program quality in NIEER’s 2006 State Preschool Yearbook and for the 2005-2006 school year, ranked 32 out of 38 state programs for access to preschool for 4-year-olds.

Arkansas Adds Money to Preschool Initiative; NIEER Report Praises Quality

In late January, NIEER published a study finding students in Arkansas’ state-funded preschool education program showed significant improvements in early language, literacy and mathematics as opposed to less impressive gains by children without the program.

Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe used these findings as a platform to push for an additional $40 million in funding for the successful Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) preschool education program, bringing total funding for the initiative up to $100 million. Beebe says that the increased funding would allow the program to expand and reach all the state’s at-risk 3- and 4-year-old children.

Arkansas’ state initiative also received high marks from NIEER’s 2006 State Preschool Yearbook—a nine out of 10 for quality, and ranked 9 out of 38 for resources invested in the program, and 5 and 15 out of 38 for access to the program for 3- and 4-year-olds, respectively. In late 2006, NIEER research fellow Clive Belfield also found that even using a conservative economic model, expanding the ABC preschool education program would return $1.58 for every dollar spent on the program.
Two High-Level Reports Call for Universal Access to Preschool Education

Two sets of policy leaders increasingly concerned about the future ability of our nation’s workforce to compete in the global economy and contribute to balancing the federal budget have recommended in their reports adoption of public policies that provide universal access to high-quality preschool education for 3- and 4-year-old children.

In Tough Choices or Tough Times, the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce says the education system in the U.S. was built for an era when work now done by machines or being farmed out to low-cost overseas workers was done by Americans. Too few American children are learning enough creative and critical thinking skills to compete for future jobs in an era when better-educated youngsters in other countries can compete thanks to computers and the Internet.

Among the recommendations are ending high school at age 16, paying teachers on a scale based on merit and location of school (i.e., urban versus rural), turning schools over to independent contractors, and having every state make high-quality preschool education available to all 3- and 4-year-old children. To read more about the report, visit http://www.skillscommission.org/executive.htm.

In its report, titled Cost-Effective Investments in Children, The Brookings Institution analyzed universal provision of pre-K to all 3- and 4-year-olds as part of its proposed formula for balancing the federal budget by 2013. According to the authors, who included economist and Brookings Institution senior fellow Isabel Sawhill, it would take spending $94 billion to deliver high-quality early childhood education for the nation’s 3- and 4-year-olds as well as spending $39 billion on three other childhood initiatives over a 5-year period to deliver the returns that would help pay off the federal debt. Other recommended steps include trimming defense spending, revising the tax code and modifying Social Security to account for the increased longevity of retirees. The full report, which is part of the Brookings Budget Options Series, is available at http://www.brookings.edu/views/papers/200701isaacs.htm.

Mississippi to Develop Experimental Preschool Education Program

The lone Southern state without a state preschool program, Mississippi is at last taking baby steps toward developing more access to preschool programs.

Governor Haley Barbour says Mississippi cannot at this time afford a full-scale, public preschool program. So he has included $1 million in his budget to introduce a small scale “preschool program” that functions as a resource and referral service. Barbour has said his vision for the service is “to teach little children’s parents how to do things for themselves and for their children.”

Critics point to the stark contrast between Governor Barbour’s $1 million referral service and state School Superintendent Hank Bounds’ proposed $10 million plan to fund 88 pilot public preschool programs throughout the state.

Governor Barbour has also said he would like to see more educational content in the Head Start program, which Mississippi relies heavily on to reach low-income and at-risk children. The state provides no funds for the program, however, relying entirely on federal funding for the program, making Mississippi the state with the highest federal Head Start spending per capita. Still, the program enrolls only about 26,000 preschoolers, while another 40,000 plus Mississippi children attend no preschool program.

Overall, slightly more than 50 percent of the state’s 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in some sort of preschool program—6 percent more than the national average, according to Education Week’s “Quality Counts” report.
Great Expectations:  
Graciela Italiano-Thomas and Washington’s Thrive by Five Partnership

Two of the biggest preschool education stories have been the movement toward universal preschool education in California and the rise of Washington’s public-private partnership dedicated to developing a new model for delivering pre-K services. Dr. Graciela Italiano-Thomas has been at the center of both. As CEO of Los Angeles Universal Preschool, Graciela Italiano-Thomas waged the struggle for UPK in the Golden State. More recently, she was named CEO of Thrive by Five Washington, a position that enables her to leverage her experience and some of the best strategic minds our country has to offer in an effort to develop a new model for delivering early childhood education. Preschool Matters asked Italiano-Thomas how she sees the challenge.

Q: You come to Thrive by Five from Los Angeles Universal Preschool, an organization you were instrumental in creating and which continues to thrive for preschool for all. How is your task at Thrive by Five different?
A: I am excited about the opportunity to build a more comprehensive, birth to 5 approach to supporting young children’s development and learning. While high-quality preschool services can make an incredible difference, other supports such as parenting education, home visitation programs, developmental screening and high-quality child care also have a big impact. I am extremely pleased to be able to develop, evaluate and assess this comprehensive approach here in Washington.

Q: Thrive by Five is backed by philanthropies of some well-known business leaders. How do they affect the dynamics of the organization?
A: The private sector backers of Thrive by Five Washington are smart strategists who believe in a collaborative approach to problem-solving. Our private partners represent a great cross-section of Washington businesses and foundations—there’s a genuine hunger within the private sector in our state to better align dollars for early learning and to move things forward in important ways. So this is a historic time for Washington, and it is truly a privilege to serve alongside all of these funders, public funders and the many parents, providers and policymakers interested in this issue.

Q: We’ve read your organization is creating an early learning model the rest of the country can use. Could you talk about that?
A: A lot of attention has focused on our two demonstration communities where we are drawing heavily from the experience of other states, and local efforts within Washington communities. We hope that these comprehensive community efforts will better illustrate the many benefits that access to high-quality early learning holds for children and their families. Demonstration communities in East Yakima and King County’s White Center neighborhood are bringing their unique characteristics and strengths to bear in building early learning choices and programs for families. We plan to evaluate both communities rigorously, and certainly will share our key lessons with the field. We also hope that over time there will be lessons to share from our investments in validating and expanding other promising programs across Washington, from our strategic investments in statewide infrastructure, and from this “model” of joining public and private interests.

Q: The drive for universal preschool education failed as a ballot initiative in California. What lessons, if any, does that have for those developing early childhood policy in other states?
A: First, according to exit polls, voters supported preschool. What they rejected is the tax measure. The initiative was complex and people in the field were fearful of it. When trouble came we didn’t have the strength of support on the ground necessary to win.

Q: The low rate of pre-K participation of Hispanic...
Ten-Country Study Finds Four Pre-K Practices That Make a Difference

study observed how teachers schedule and manage children’s time, what children actually do with their time, the behaviors used by teachers and the nature of their interaction with children, according to study director Jeanne E. Montie.

“The findings highlight the importance of allowing children to be active participants in their own learning, and of providing ample opportunities for children to choose their own activities, work individually or in small groups, and work directly with a variety of materials,” said Montie, who along with High/Scope Foundation President Lawrence J. Schweinhart and Zongping Xiang co-authored the study. “The findings also reinforce the importance of the education of early childhood teachers,” added Montie.

Montie said the research is unique because of the many diverse countries that participated and common instruments used to measure family background, teachers’ characteristics, structural features of settings, children’s experiences and children’s developmental status. She also pointed out that the findings refute the widely-held belief that no universal relationships exist between preprimary practices and later behavior.

According to co-author Schweinhart, “The positive relationship between the number of years of teachers’ education and children’s language scores seems intuitive based on past research in home and preschool settings. However, the relationship between children’s language development to free choice activities is less obvious.”

Child’s Perspective

He said that from a child’s perspective the activities the child selects are interesting and engaging and suit the difficulty level of the child, whereas activities selected by the teacher may be too easy or difficult or simply not interesting.

“Free choice activities provide the opportunity and, often, the necessity for children to interact verbally with other children in one-on-one or small group play—assigning roles for dramatic play, establishing rules for games, making plans for block building, and so forth,” said Schweinhart. “Further, the informal nature of free play provides an opportunity for teachers to engage children in conversation specific to their play and to introduce new vocabulary relevant to the children’s interests, thereby promoting language acquisition.”

The findings are consistent with those from other studies including the Harvard Graduate School of Education Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development. David K. Dickinson, co-principal investigator of the Harvard study said, “free play is the time when children flex their linguistic and conceptual muscles and contribute to each other’s development.”

Further research in the United Kingdom by Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, found that more highly trained teachers were the most effective in their interactions with children, using the most sustained shared-thinking interactions.

The IEA research project showed the relationship between teacher-proposed whole group activities and children’s cognitive performance at age 7 is just the opposite.

The report suggests that during large group activities there is little opportunity for children to have lengthy reciprocal conversations for the purpose of planning their play or solving problems. Further, when adult-centered teaching is used, adults are primarily giving children information, with interaction under the control of the adult. When children respond as a group they generally repeat what is expected of them with little thought given to the automatic responses.

“If an activity does not challenge a child or if it is too difficult, little useful learning takes place,” said Schweinhart. “In order to build cognitive skills, children need to solve problems and explore materials on their own. Learning and creativity takes place when children confront situations that pique their interest and stretch their imaginations.”

The researchers from the Michigan-based High/Scope Foundation coordinated the project in collaboration with colleagues from the 10 countries studied. An article based on the findings was published in the Fall 2006 issue of Early Childhood Research Quarterly. The preprint version of the report is at http://www.highscope.org/Research/international/IEA_Age_7_ecrq_art.pdf.

Great Expectations: Graciela Italiano-Thomas

compared to non-Hispanic children nationally (though some areas of the country have very high rates for Hispanics) is receiving more attention these days. What’s your perspective on this?

At Hispanic parents, like all of us, have big dreams for their children. According to an August 2006 New America Media survey, less than 10 percent of the ethnic parents surveyed would be satisfied if their child only graduated from high school. Although ethnic parents see preschool as playing an important educational role for their children, less than 30 percent of parents with children under the age of 5 have enrolled them in such a program. Why? We know that culture and language play a role, but half of Latino parents who responded said that there are no quality child care or day care centers in their neighborhood or town that they can afford. That’s something that we need to improve.
Ten-Country Study Finds Four Pre-K Practices That Make a Difference

Young children who participate in high-quality prekindergarten programs benefit from enriched cognitive, social and emotional development—that much is clear based on years of conclusive research. But questions persist about the education levels needed for effective teachers as well as what specific classroom activities provide the greatest advantages—in short, what are the elements of a high-quality education that transcend countries and cultures and that can help refine classroom practices to improve children’s learning capabilities?

Thanks to new results from a longitudinal study with data collected from 10 countries, we now have evidence of four policies and practices that are consistently related to positive child language and cognitive outcomes for children at the age of 7.

The International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Preprimary Project, coordinated by researchers at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, found that teacher education level does matter and that children make greater progress when their teachers emphasize child-initiated activities, limit the use of whole-group instruction and provide abundant materials in the classroom.

According to the study, Preschool Experience in 10 Countries: Cognitive and Language Performance at Age 7, after controlling for family and cultural influences, improved language for children at age 7 is linked directly to:

- Classroom activities where teachers let children choose the activities in which they will participate, including dramatic play, arts, crafts and music, rather than teacher-prescribed activities; and
- Teachers with greater numbers of years of full-time schooling.

Further, children’s cognitive performance at the age of 7 improved as:

- Children spent less time in whole group activities, and
- More equipment and materials were made available to the preschool classrooms.

More than 1,400 4-year-olds across Finland, Greece, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain, Thailand and the United States took part in the longitudinal study that measured children’s cognitive and language status at the ages of 4 and again at 7. At age 4, the

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