

Site-level predictors of children's school and social competence in the Chicago Child–Parent Centers

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Abstract

We examined the influence of individual and site-level factors from the Chicago Child–Parent Centers (CPC) early educational program on four competence outcomes for 1539 minority youth in the Chicago Longitudinal Study. Individual-level factors included race, gender, risk status, kindergarten duration, and preschool and follow-on experience. Two models were developed to examine site-level factors. The program model included instructional approach, site location, and parent involvement. The school model included the percentage of families that were low-income and the percentage of families that were residentially stable. Outcomes included kindergarten word analysis, eighth grade reading achievement, high school completion, and juvenile delinquency. Results based on hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses indicated that preschool participation was more important than any of the site-level factors. The most consistent site-level finding was that lower income levels within a school attendance area was linked with poorer school and social outcomes. Site-level parental involvement predicted both early and later school outcomes. Instructional approach was not a significant program factor. Site location and family stability were not typically predictive of child outcomes. Policy implications and limitations of the study are addressed.

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1. Introduction

Many studies find that children's early learning can be accelerated by educational enrichment. Participation in center-based preschool interventions is consistently associated with many outcomes, including

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cognitive abilities, school achievement, and social competence (Barnett & Boocock, 1998; Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Gory, 2001; Karoly et al., 1998). These impacts are as large as three quarters of a standard deviation, and are comparable to the effects of socioeconomic status (White, 1982) and school quality (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Less attention in the early childhood field has been given to the school and community contexts of programs that may strengthen or inhibit the positive effects of intervention experiences. While this restricted focus is understandable, investigation of the contributions of family, program, and school factors can provide a more comprehensive portrait of the early determinants of children's outcomes.

In this study, we investigated the contribution of school and program characteristics as well as personal experiences in the Child–Parent Center (CPC) preschool program to children's kindergarten achievement and later school achievement, delinquency, and educational attainment. Using data from the CLS (Chicago Longitudinal Study, 1999), a prospective investigation of school and social adjustment of over 1500 low-income minority children, we assessed if socioeconomic disadvantage, family stability, instructional approach, program site location, and parent involvement at the site level predicted children's outcomes independently of individual and family factors.

1.1. Contexts of early childhood development

Environmental contexts affect individual development in complex and often unexplored ways. In early childhood settings, variations in three types of factors contribute independently to children's outcomes: program, school, and individual factors. The first is differences in program focus and implementation. Among the components found to enhance children's success are instructional approach, parental involvement, and other structural aspects of the program. Although curricula appear to be important to children's school related outcomes, it is unclear whether a teacher-directed or a child-initiated focus is most predictive of positive child outcomes. The use of child-initiated curricula as well as teacher-directed curricula emphasizing oral communication, phonics, emergent literacy, and numeracy skills have been positively associated with greater school readiness and performance (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffen, 1998). Some researchers have suggested the use of a combined approach as a compromise in the curricula debate but this approach has been found to be less effective than others, especially the child-initiated approach (Marcon, 1999a, 2002). However, teachers in these prior studies appeared to be using a “middle-of-the-road” combined approach suggesting they had little direction regarding instructional focus (Marcon, 1999a, 2002).

Recent evidence from the CLS and other studies has shown that when curricula approaches are combined in a way that fits with a program philosophy meant to provide instruction that supports the learning and development of all children, the combined approach can be more effective for some outcomes than either child- or teacher-initiated approaches alone (Meisels et al., 2003; Niles, Reynolds, Clements, & Robertson, 2002). The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies (1983) found that no particular instructional approach was superior to any other approach; rather the key was effective implementation of a chosen model in a developmentally appropriate way. According to the National Research Council (Bowman et al., 2001), both teacher-directed and child-initiated instruction can be effective with each influencing different outcomes and neither being most effective for all outcomes. It is recommended that teacher-directed and child-initiated instruction be integrated to support children's learning.

As with instructional approach, parental involvement is an essential program component having been positively linked to children's educational adjustment (Fan, 2001; Marcon, 1999b; Miedel & Reynolds,

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