Early Childhood Education and Services for all Children: A Call to Action for Social Science and Human Service Professionals

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Abstract

School readiness has become an increasing concern in the United States over the past 40 years. Since the advent of the Civil Rights Movement and the war on poverty, social policy makers have

been very much concerned with understanding the relationship between poverty, school readiness, and academic achievement. Current research on school readiness suggests that 25-60% of our young children are not ready to enter and succeed in kindergarten. Research on students who drop out and those with special needs has found that many of these students were behind prior to entering school. Efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood programs and services have yielded inconclusive results. The purpose of this paper is to identify early childhood services that low income parents utilize and elucidate possible barriers to their securing these services.

Early childhood is a period of rapid development. What children experience from birth through age five greatly influences the eventual development of language skills, reasoning and problem solving skills, social skills, behavior, and emotional health (Livingston, 2006). There is little doubt that opportunities lost in the early childhood period, particularly in the areas of cognitive and language skills, are extremely difficult to recoup in later years (Grimley & Bennet, 2008). Cognitive and language skills are key components of school readiness that are needed to ensure a child is ready to succeed academically, mentally, emotionally, and physically (The National Education Goals Panel, 1993). As such, evaluating the context in which readiness skills and subsequent learning outcomes develop is of key importance.

Early childhood education programs provide young children with the experiences they need to thrive and to help close the achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children (American Federation of Teachers, 2002). Few of the eight million children in pre-school attend programs that meet even basic standards of quality, causing some program evaluators to question the utility of such programs for improving learning outcomes and development (American Federation of Teachers, 2002).

Several early childhood education programs were established under *No Child Left Behind* in 2001 to address the preparatory needs of children. However, few have yielded conclusive results (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). *Head Start* is a federally funded early childhood program for children from low-income households and children with developmental delays or disabilities. Head Start is unique due to its focus on health, nutrition, and parental involvement. The *Grow Start* initiative is a federal program that partners with Head Start to provide services to low-income families by educating parents on school readiness programs and providing teachers with tools to meet their needs. The *Even Start* Program provides informational services to parents in low-income neighborhoods. This program improves the educational opportunities for children and parents in low-income areas by integrating early childhood education, adult education, parenting education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and their children into "family literacy" programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

In addition to federally funded initiatives, state funded programs also provide services to approximately 12 percent of the 8 million 3 and 4-year-old children in the United States (American Federation of Teachers, 2002). States are developing early childhood education policies to create strategic programs that provide quality early childhood education programs and serve to families with limited financial and social accessibility. Several states have increased their efforts to improve early childhood education. Eight states including Florida, Illinois, Arkansas, and the District of Columbia require all early childhood education teachers to have a bachelor's degree. Twenty-eight states require a one-to-10 adult/child ratio in early childhood programs, while eight states pay early childhood education teachers salaries comparable to K-12 educators. When properly operated, these programs help society avoid the greater costs of remedial education, delinquency, and unemployment (Grimley & Bennet, 2008).

However, parental involvement and awareness and utilization of early childhood programs and services have been grossly understudied. Parents are often unaware of programs and services for their children and feel underrepresented in the

support of programs within their communities. This is especially apparent in low-income areas where families lack access to needed resources and have little knowledge of available resources (Wong, Livingston, Cliette, & Eaton, 2009). Insufficiently appropriated resources for children and families only widen the gap between their academic success and overall parental involvement. Research further supports this notion of insufficient resources (Wong, et al, 2009). Moreover, when schools serving low-income neighborhoods and communities represent the unit of analysis, researchers have found parent involvement in school-centric programs and activities to often be minimal, sporadic, or altogether nonexistent (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 1999; Chavkin, 1993; Lareau, 1996). However, youth with sufficient support and opportunities from their families, neighborhoods, and communities develop assets that enable them to avoid problem behaviors and to thrive as they transition to adulthood (Connell & Kubisch, 2001; Scales, 1996).

The importance of parental involvement and adequate programs and resources are essential components in increasing learning outcomes for children from birth to age five. Given the high rates of school failure among intercity youth and the high rates of referral to exceptional children's programs, there is a need to understand parents' perceptions of early childhood programs and services.

The purpose of the present study was to: 1) identify which programs and services young parents are aware of and utilize; 2) indentify possible barriers to parents accessing these programs; 3) determine what parents perceive as lacking in regards to early childhood services; and 4) identify how parents would like to become involved in and improve existing services.

Methods

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the needs of parents representing the target population, study investigators conducted a community survey at 10 geographically dispersed sites in underserved neighborhoods, community centers, and community-wide events. Participants who agreed to complete the survey were provided information about the study and its importance as well as told their names would be placed in a drawing for a cash prize. They were given a questionnaire, which asked for demographic information as well as information on service utilization (program awareness and utilization; lack of early childhood learning opportunities, barriers to service participation, ways to improve existing services, and involvement in improving services) related to early childhood. Parents' perceptions of early childhood programs and services were analyzed based on their answers to open-ended questions relating to awareness and utilization of services. Using thematic content analysis, the research team extracted main themes and sub-themes from the responses to each question.

Results

Sample Profile

One hundred twenty-nine parents from different ethnic backgrounds participated in the survey: 38.8% African American, 33.3% European American, 9.3% Latinos, 8.5% were newly immigrated Africans, 2.3% Caribbean Islanders, 4.7% Bi-racial and the remaining 3.1% were from various Asian and Middle Eastern ethnicities. Participants were predominantly female (73.2%) with a mean age of 37.7 (SD=11.4) years. A majority of parents (60.7%) indicated they were the primary caregiver of a child; almost one half (49.4%) had preschool children (ages 0-5); and more than half (58.3%) earned less than $30,000 per year.

Findings

Table 1 describes the major themes that emerged from the focus groups.

Table 1.
Main Themes Emerging from Focus Group Questions

Question 1: What programs were you aware of and utilizied?

1. The WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) Program.
2. Head Start
3. Parks and Recreation

Question 2: Are there any barriers to participation?

1. Lack of adequate and efficient transportation.
2. Ability to pay.
3. Poor communications between human service profressionals and families.
4. Program awareness.

Question 3: What do you think is lacking in regards to early childhood learning opportunities in the area?

1. An adequate number of high-quality programs.
2. Program awareness and advertisement.
3. Parent education programs.

Question 4: What are some ways to improve existing services?

1. Better advertisements of programs and services.
2. More early childhood programs.
3. More funding programs.

Question 5: How would you like to become involved in improving existing services?

1. Volunteer and help other parents.
2. Participate in programs.
3. Inform other parents about early childhood issues.

What programs were you aware of and utilized?

Parents indicated they were very much aware of Head Start, Jump Start, and other early childhood education programs and parenting services in their community. Additionally, many of them utilized the local social services office and the local Health Department. Parents indicated that both agencies provided a great opportunity to get information about other agencies and programs in the community, such as WIC and childcare programs.

Are there any barriers to participation?

A number of the parents indicated that the income guidelines and inability to access services when needed were definite barriers for their receiving services. Additionally, distrust of human service providers was a barrier among younger parents. Parents also indicated that better public transportation and advertisements by early childhood agencies were needed to improve access to services and raise awareness of early childhood programs and services.

What do you think is lacking in regards to early childhood learning opportunities?

Participants thought more parent education classes were needed, as well as more flexibility from employers so that they could attend classes. Night and weekend childcare and programs and services offered at times consistent with participants' work schedules were also indicated. A number of the participants felt that a comprehensive resource guide would be helpful for parents, as well as more housing and job opportunities for young families.

Ways to improve existing services?

Parents felt that, to increase parent involvement in many programs, the programs should include activities for children. Better communication and understanding between parents and caseworkers and other human service providers were also seen as ways to improve existing services. Participants felt that gaining understanding and support from employers would greatly increase parent involvement in early childhood programs and services.

How would you like to become involved in improving existing services?

Participants indicated the following things they could as important: 1) telling other parents about the services they have been exposed to or accessed; 2) volunteering and taking on leadership roles to help increase awareness and support of early childhood programs; and 3) assisting younger parents in finding services and providing care for their children.

Discussion

In summarizing the need for more effective practices, parents felt they would feel more included if they were given the opportunity to provide input on how services could be improved. A number of participants reported they were familiar with and utilized such services as WIC and Head Start. However, many parents were unaware of the wide range of early childhood services in the area. Many suggested that broader advertisements to increase program awareness were key. For many parents, access and transportation were barriers to seeking services.

Educators, policy makers, communities-at-large, and families must collectively provide input in the development of effective early childhood programs that not only provide the essential steps in promoting academic achievement but also cater to the needs of the populations they are intended to serve. An increase in parental participation may result if needs are addressed with compassion and concern. Families, even in low-income areas, value the support from their community, especially when it concerns their child's academic success and positive learning outcomes. Quality early childhood program centers promote school readiness, enhance verbal skills, and decrease the likelihood of reading difficulties later in school (Butin, 2000). Policy-centered initiatives that address accessibility and utilization of quality early childhood education programs is one of the first steps in assuring that all children will be ready for school.

Limitations

Although the current study provided a wealth of data to researchers and human service professionals, there were limitations. Only about 26 percent of the sample was male. Given the increase in the number of single fathers who are the primary care givers, this is problematic. Moreover, although the sample represented parents from various ethnic backgrounds, the small and nonprobability sample may limit the generalizability of finding to a larger population of parents.

Conclusion

To alleviate the aforementioned potential barriers to seeking services, to increase awareness of early childhood programs and services among parents, and to make sure that children receive needed early childhood services, the following suggestions are provided:

1. Utilize Public Service Announcements on radio and television stations that cater to parents, especially low-income parents;
2. Establish relationships with community newspapers and newsletters that serve communities of color;
3. Establish information booths at annual community events in low-income communities; and
4. Provide information to local community centers and neighborhood network centers in low-income communities.

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