



The Impact of Head Start Partnership on Child Care Quality

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

In light of federal and state leaders' support for creating a more seamless system of child care and early education services, questions exist about how to best support partnerships that improve outcomes for both children and their families. With the expansion of federal- and state-funded child care subsidies and separate early education programs in the 1960s, our nation created child care programs designed primarily to support parents' workforce participation and separate early education programs to support children's early development (Schilder, Kiron et al., 2003; Selden, 2006). While both child care and early education programs offer services to young children, the goals and structure of these programs differ (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families/Administration on Children Youth and Families/Child Care Bureau, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families, 2007). Recognizing the potential benefit of partnerships between child care and other early education programs, policymakers have supported partnerships at the point of service delivery, with the aim of meeting both the child development needs of young children and the workforce participation needs of their parents (Sowa, 2001; Schilder, 2003; Schumacher, Ewen et al., 2005).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office of Policy Research and Evaluation (OPRE) provided grant funding to researchers at Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) to conduct a rigorous investigation of the impact of one type of partnership—formal arrangements between child care providers, which primarily provide support for families' workforce participation, and Head Start programs, which focus on children's early development. This research builds on existing research findings that partnerships between child care and Head Start are associated with improved benefits at the program level. Our study examines whether partnerships yield benefits for family child care providers, examines quality at the classroom level, and explores the relationship between partnership and children's school readiness. This report represents the findings from our study of partnerships called the Child Care Quality Project (Grant Number 90YE0077).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Our study addresses the broad question of whether child care providers in partnership with Head Start demonstrate quality improvements compared with similar child care providers that are not partnering with Head Start. The sub-questions we address are as follows:

- Is observed classroom quality in center-based child care programs in partnership with Head Start higher than observed quality in comparison classrooms?
- Is the duration of the partnership related to improvements in observed quality?

- Do children in classrooms in partnership with Head Start demonstrate greater improvements in school readiness as measured by language and literacy outcomes than children in classrooms not in partnership?
- Do family child care providers in partnership with Head Start report higher levels of quality than providers not in partnership with Head Start?
- What are the implications of research findings regarding child care/Head Start partnership for child care and early education policy and practice?

Methods

To address our research questions, we analyzed data collected from a sample of child care providers in Ohio. We selected Ohio as our study state because lessons learned from this state are more likely to be transferrable to other states since the child care licensing standards and demographic characteristics are similar to those of states across the nation. We collected new observational data from child care centers and family child care homes, collected new survey data from family child care providers, conducted child assessments, and analyzed existing archival survey data. To investigate differences between providers in partnership with Head Start and comparison providers, we collected data from providers in partnership with Head Start and a comparison group that was not partnering with Head Start that was matched based on percent of children receiving child care subsidies and location.

For purposes of this research study, the term “partnership” refers to a formal contractual relationship between a Head Start program and a child care provider. Terms used interchangeably with partnership are “collaboration” or “integration” (Simpson, Jivanjee et al., 2001; Paulsell, Cohen et al., 2002; Ray, 2002; Selden, 2006). However, because the federal government and many states use the term partnership to refer to the contractual relationship between Head Start and child care we use the term partnership in this study.

To address questions regarding the implications of the findings, we presented the findings to key decision-makers responsible for child care and early education policies and practices. We conducted focus groups to obtain their perspectives. Our focus group participants included state child care administrators, Head Start State collaboration directors, and national child care and Head Start leaders.

FINDINGS

Partnership Predicts Improved Classroom Quality

Classrooms in child care centers partnering with Head Start demonstrated significantly higher observed classroom quality than comparison classrooms. Specifically, ANOVA results revealed that classrooms in partnership centers had higher observed global quality on two measures of classroom quality—the Environmental Rating Scale Revised edition (ECERS-R) a measure of global quality, and the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Toolkit (ELLCO)—a measure of language and literacy practices. Classrooms in partnership had significantly higher scores on most of the ECERS-R sub-scales ($p < .05$) as

reported in table 1 below. Moreover, classrooms in partnership performed statistically significantly higher on language and literacy practices as measured by the ELLCO ($p < .05$).

Table 1. ECERS-R and ELLCO Scores by Partnership Status

Classroom Assessment	Comparison (n=24) M (SD)	Partnership (n=42) M (SD)
ECERS-R		
Space & Furnishings	3.7 (1.1)	4.2 (1.2)
Personal Care Routines	2.5 (1.2)	2.8 (1.2)
Language Reasoning	3.6 (1.4)	4.6 (1.8)*
Activities	3.1 (1.0)	4.0 (1.5)*
Interactions	3.4 (1.8)	4.6 (1.9)*
Program Structure	3.6 (1.6)	4.9 (1.8)**
ELLCO		
General Classroom Environment	14.4 (5.9)	18.0 (6.0)*
Language, Literacy, and Curriculum	16.8 (8.2)	24.3 (9.3)**
Classroom Observation Total	33.0 (14.0)	44.7 (16.0)**

* $p < .05$ level, ** $p < .01$ level

Partnership Duration Predicts Observed Quality

As expected, we found positive associations between duration of partnership and observed quality using Ordinary Least Squares Regression analysis. We found a strong and statistically significant relationship between the duration of the partnership and scores on ECERS-R and ELLCO when controlling for the percentage of students receiving child care subsidies.

Partnership Predicts Some Improvements In School Readiness Outcomes

Our analysis of child assessment scores revealed that on average children at partnership centers were more likely than comparison children to demonstrate significant improvements on the language and literacy sub-scales related to phonological awareness (beginning sounds and print awareness) and nearly significant improvements ($p < .10$) on two other sub-scales (upper case letter recognition and rhyming awareness), but were no more likely than children at comparison centers to demonstrate improvements on the remaining language and literacy assessments. We compared children's gain scores across three rounds of data collection using ANOVA. We found statistically significant and nearly significant improvements on assessments of children's knowledge regarding upper case letters, print and word awareness, and rhyming ability. However, we found no significant differences on assessments of receptive vocabulary, receptive language, or emergent writing.

We found that duration of the partnership predicted improvements in receptive vocabulary, receptive language and many of the aspects of phonological awareness after controlling for partnership duration. However, partnership duration was not significantly related to improvements in upper case letter recognition.

Family Child Care Providers in Partnership Report Higher Quality but Not Improved Interactions

Like child care centers in partnership with Head Start, the characteristics of family child care providers vary in terms of the number of children in attendance, the population of children served, and the characteristics of the providers. Despite the variation, family child care providers in partnership are more likely than comparison providers to offer comprehensive services and to provide an educationally enriched curriculum.

Family child care providers in partnership are more likely than comparison providers to participate in professional development. For example, partnering providers were more likely to attend conferences, or receive in-home support from an outside agency, than comparison providers. Moreover, a majority (58 percent) of partnering family child care providers reported that they had participated in professional development and training that was supported by Head Start. A smaller group (22 percent) reported having the opportunity to receive professional development and training that is offered to Head Start staff.

No significant differences between partnership and comparison family child care homes were observed on global measures of observed quality as measured by the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS) and the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale. However, we found that family child care providers in partnership actually performed worse than comparison providers on the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Punitive sub-scale ($p < .05$).

Implications of Research Findings for Policy and Practice

To learn about the implications of these findings for policy and practice we collected data from stakeholders across the country. Child care and early education stakeholders—including child care administrators, Head Start State collaboration directors, state prekindergarten specialists, national policy experts, and researchers—reported that our research findings on child care/Head Start partnerships have important implications for policy and practice.

Child care and early education leaders suggested that federal and state decision-makers could take specific actions in light of the research findings.

- Rather than supporting collaboration broadly, take actions that support child care/Head Start partnerships that blend funds and services at the point of service delivery with the goal of meeting the dual needs of children and families.
- Recognize that partnership requires resources to yield desired benefits.
- Provide consistent ongoing communication at all levels of government.
- Consider supporting joint child care and Head Start assessments and monitoring activities.
- Encourage states to use incentive funds and quality dollars to support partnerships.
- Use training and technical assistance to support partnerships.
- Continue to support systematic links between partnership research and policy.

CONCLUSION

Our study found that child care/Head Start partnerships are associated with a number of desired benefits at the provider, classroom and child level. National and state policymakers suggested that these findings can inform policy decisions, training and technical assistance efforts, and decisions regarding partnership formation at the provider level as individuals at all levels consider ways to best meet the needs of low-income working parents and their children.

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Suggested Citation: Schilder, D., Broadstone, M., Chauncey, B., Kiron, E., Miller, C., Lim, Y. (2009). Child care quality study: Impact of Head Start partnership on child care quality executive summary. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.