

# Strategies to improve school readiness for the child



The first five years of a child's life is the most sensitive for brain development. Early brain development plays a key role in the child's educational success. The brain is heavily influenced by healthy relationships, high quality learning experiences, and responsive learning environments. A large body of research indicates that children living in poverty display atypical structural development, thus widening the school readiness gap compared to their counterparts by school entry (Blair, Raver 2017; Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, Pollak 2015). An intervention aimed at improving school readiness is investing in high quality pre-kindergarten programs for economically disadvantaged children (Pressler, Raver, Friedman-Krauss, Roy, 2016; Barnett, Jung, Youn, and Frede 2015; Weiland and Yoshikawa 2013).

Robust evidence from Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effect Study (APPLES) proven that pre-kindergarten programs progressed over the years. The Abbott Preschool Program is a result of New Jersey's Supreme Court's 1998 decision in *Abbott v. Burke*. The ruling lead to the implementation of universal eligibility to ensure that all 3- and 4-year-old children from 31 New Jersey's economically disadvantaged school districts are provided with high quality education to help narrow the school readiness gap (Barnett, Jung, Youn, and Frede 2013). Many publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs have income eligibility guidelines. These guidelines effect other children who come from families with limited financial resources. Limiting the access to these programs will only perpetuate school readiness disparities. Publicly advertised universal pre-kindergarten models such as APPLES, Michigan Great Start School Readiness Program, and Boston's pre-kindergarten have demonstrated success, as well as substantial gains beyond kindergarten.

These studies differ in the way they were conducted; however, participants demonstrated persistent school readiness skills compared to children who completed one year of preschool or who did attend at all (Barnett, Jung, Youn, and Frede 2013; Weiland and Yoshikawa 2013; Schweinhart, L. J., Xiang, Z., Daniel-Echols, M., Browning, K. & Wakabayashi, T 2012).

School Readiness is an important factor of children's academic and success in life. Key competencies for school readiness domains include: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics development (Jenkins, Duncan, Auger, Bitler, Domina, Bruchinal 2018).

Rigorous evidence from APPLES suggests that these domains are heavily influenced in preschool settings that offers high quality learning. To illustrate, APPLES participants made significant gains in all curricula domains during the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade follow-up in all assessment areas. Additionally, the researchers found ongoing improvements in classroom quality. Classroom quality is a critical aspect of the children's educational experiences, as it is strongly associated with school readiness domains (Frede, Jung, Barnett, Lamy, Figueras, 2007). The fourth and fifth grade follow-up strengthen the inferences that pre-kindergarten programs are the foundation for school readiness. APPLES participants gained 9.0 points in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and 7.6 points in fifth grade in Math (Barnett, Jung, Youn, and Frede 2013). These results imply that high quality pre-kindergarten programs ensure that children are provided with learning experiences that will leverage their success in kindergarten and beyond.

Furthermore, the state of Florida prioritized investments in early childhood education programs for at risk children. Florida has developed a statewide initiative known as School Readiness Research Alliance. The goal is to improve affordability and expand the access to quality child care through public and private sectors. The alliance consists of 13 organizations; one organization is known as Early Learning Coalition (ELC) of Broward County, Florida. Early learning programs apart of ELC School Readiness Funded Providers must use a Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum (DAC) that supports the child's development and learning in the following areas: social-emotional, physical, language, and cognitive. According to the National Association of Early Childhood (NAEYC) stated that curriculums must be "(a) sensitive to the developmental capabilities and backgrounds of the individual children, (b) addresses the multiple must domains of children's development, and (c) supports the view that children are active participants in the learning process will promote positive, long-term achievement in academic settings" (NAEYC 2003).

As a former Master Teacher with Broward County, the School Readiness Funded providers used different types of Developmentally Appropriate Curriculums. For the purpose of this research, the researcher will focus on Teaching Strategies. Teaching Strategies provides ground-breaking curriculum and assessment to programs serving children from birth to third grade. The curriculum consists of 38 research-based objectives that are aligned with early learning guidelines. The objectives cover 10 areas of learning and development (Dodge, Durham, Duckett, & Stover, 2011). In the same manner, the assessment tool measures student development, while

facilitating documentation of daily activities as children interact and perform independently or in small group (Kim, Lambert, & Burts, 2013). The effectiveness of Teaching Strategies was recently examined by independent researchers. Researchers concluded that classrooms where teachers utilize both curriculum and assessment scored higher in language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics, compared to classrooms where teachers used a different curriculum along with Teaching Strategies GOLD (Durham, 2013).

Selecting a developmentally appropriate curriculum is essential to improving student outcomes. Teachers, administrators and support staff must implement the curriculum in the same manner it was developed by the researcher or developer (Harn, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, 2013). This concept is known as fidelity of implementation. When interventions are implemented with poor fidelity, results will weaken or may even result in negative consequences (Haataja et al 2014). The recent research has shown the impact of high-quality preschool programs on child outcomes for at risk children. However, interventions targeted for disadvantage children must not be viewed as a complete solution. Consideration must be given to the need at improving the fidelity of implementation of innovative and effective curriculums such as Teaching Strategies GOLD. Teachers and School leaders within Broward County are concerned about the low academic performance of these students. School leaders and teachers are not knowledgeable about Teaching Strategies and lack an understanding on how to implement the tool to fidelity (personal communication, January 2017). Teachers have demonstrated a lack of motivation and personal ownership when using all the resources within the curriculum ( personal communication January 2017).

Additionally, teachers have expressed that using Teaching Strategies is time consuming, tedious, and there is a lack on of ongoing strategic planning ( Personal communication, January 2017). Unfortunately, the curriculum was not evaluated in terms of fidelity of implementation. Therefore, only 59 percent of preschool passed the school readiness rate in 2016-2017( Office of Early Learning Coalition, 2017).

Measuring fidelity of implementation will effectively facilitate student achievement. Compelling evidence from Rimm-Kaufman et al (2014) study revealed that students' performance on math and reading benchmarks was statistically high when teachers implemented their teaching practices with high fidelity. There are varying factors that affect fidelity such as social and cultural context Additionally, organizational structure such as management support, employee training, and class-ratio, impacts the implementation of instructional programs. A major challenge evaluating programs is capturing all the measures of implementation fidelity (i. e. contents, methods, activities,) and how they impact child outcomes. In sum, proper evaluation of Teaching Strategies will support the implementation of the curriculum through appropriate academic preparation, ongoing professional development, and supervision to ensure students are adequately prepared for kindergarten and beyond.

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