

## **Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Public School Prekindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities**

Josee Gregoire and Luretha Lucky  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** A stratified sample of teachers was surveyed to determine their opinion about a Pre-k Program for Children with Disabilities. The results revealed that the teachers were satisfied with their students' progress, the support received from their administrators and district, and their ability to implement the curriculum to meet students' needs.

Many pre-school children with disabilities and their families have been the recipient of services under the federal law passed in 1986 called the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments or P.L. 99-457, which was later renamed the Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 or IDEA (Florian, 1995). Since its inception, various studies have been done on the effectiveness of Early Childhood Special Education and how the delivery system can more effectively serve children with disabilities and their families across diverse populations (Barnett & Frede, 1993). Additionally, studies have found that early intervention services make a very noticeable difference in the lives of the children currently served (Odom, McLean, Johnson & LaMontagne, 1995). Methods have also been used to measure the effectiveness of Early Childhood Special Education such as parent interviews, teacher preparation programs, personnel knowledge and expertise, and observation of interaction with children (Barnett & Frede, 1993; Barnett, Macmann & Carey, 1992; File & Kontos, 1993; Le Ager & Shapiro, 1995; McCollum & Yates, 1994; Miller, 1991).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The service delivery system in use depends on many factors such as children's needs, the structure set up by the local district, and personnel preparation. Also, as more researchers conduct studies in the field of Early Childhood Special Education, it is becoming clear that intervention must be fierce and early to be effective for children with disabilities (Odom, McConnell & Chandler, 1993; Odom et al., 1995). Different studies have used different methods to evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood special education programs. Miller (1991) used a survey in which she asked respondents to answer questions regarding their particular work sites. The questions measured the general knowledge of personnel working in those settings. Miller found that only one region in the U.S. out of five had more than 50% of the respondents who could answer satisfactorily to questions on knowledge of theory of learning and development, reasoning behind assessments used on children and reasoning behind curriculum choices. Furthermore, other studies (Barnett et al., 1992; File & Kontos, 1993; Le Ager & Shapiro, 1995) have mentioned using individual student assessments to ascertain program effectiveness. However, these inventories tend to measure individual student achievement rather than the effectiveness of the program as a whole.

Finally, other studies (Barnett & Frede, 1993; McCollum & Yates, 1994) have examined the connection between personnel preparation and program effectiveness. Results have been most promising in this area because the researchers have found that personnel knowledge of Early Childhood Special Education and awareness of program goals led to a closer match between

curriculum, assessments used to measure student progress and more defined goals for program effectiveness. Awareness of personnel knowledge also led to technical assistance relevant to the needs of personnel and aimed at improvement of skills. This study sought to determine a pre-kindergarten program's effectiveness by surveying teachers who taught in the program.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were randomly selected from a pool of pre-kindergarten teachers currently employed in a South Florida public school district. This pre-k program serves children with disabilities ages three to five years old.

### *Instrument*

A questionnaire was used to survey the pre-kindergarten teachers. The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain teachers' responses on a number of issues such as knowledge of curriculum, perceived ability to implement individualized education to students, perceived support from the school site and district administration, and communication with parents. The instrument contained 18 items: 15 used the Likert scale format, and 3 used the checklist format for demographic information. The demographics included area of certification, type of instructional setting, and years of experience in the field.

### *Procedure*

The questionnaire was mailed to teachers working in the pre-k program. One hundred questionnaires were mailed out, with 79 returned. The results were tabulated to determine how each teacher rated the statements and also to determine if there were correlations across variables.

## **Results**

### *Curriculum*

Knowledge of the pre-kindergarten curriculum is important for teachers to plan instruction for their students. The analysis of the data revealed that of the 79 teachers responding to the Likert-type items on the questionnaire, the majority reported they understood the scope and sequence of the curriculum, felt competent with curriculum delivery, and felt strongly that the curriculum was adequate to meet the needs of their students. (See Table 1.)

### *Teachers Perceptions of Students' Progress*

Table 1 shows that the majority of the teachers agreed that their students were making steady progress in school. Almost half of those responding agreed that they had sufficient time to individualize curriculum. However, some indicated that they did not have sufficient time to individualize instruction for their students. The teachers agreed that they are able to measure progress in their students. Teachers also reported that, within the scope of the curriculum, they were able to make the adaptations needed to meet their students' needs.

Table 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Prekindergarten Program

Variables	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<u>Curriculum</u>								
2. Scope and sequence	60	75.9	19	24.1	--	--	--	--
3. Competent in delivery	58	73.4	19	24.1	1	1.3	--	--
9. Adaptation	22	27.8	39	49.4	15	19.0	2	2.5
13. Adequacy	39	49.4	35	44.3	3	3.8	1	1.3
<u>Teachers' Perception of Students' Progress</u>								
1. Students make progress	51	64.6	25	31.6	1	1.3	1	1.3
4. Competent in curriculum delivery	8	10.1	38	48.1	31	39.2	--	--
8. Ability to measure overall progress	35	44.3	43	54.4	1	1.3	--	--
14. Confusion about adaptations needed	3	3.8	4	5.1	44	55.7	28	35.4
<u>Support Provided</u>								
5. Support from school site	19	24.1	49	62.0	8	10.1	2	2.5
6. Support from district	53	67.1	23	29.1	2	2.5	--	--
<u>Professional Development</u>								
7. More training to be effective	7	8.9	25	31.6	37	46.8	9	11.4
10. Confused about expectation	--	--	2	2.5	36	45.6	41	51.9
<u>Delivery of Services</u>								
11. Satisfied with program	39	49.4	37	46.8	3	3.8	--	--
15. Improvement, delivery	5	6.3	36	45.6	31	39.2	4	5.1
<u>Parent Communication</u>								
12. Communication, parents	59	74.7	19	24.1	1	1.3	--	--

### *Support Provided to the Teachers and Professional Development*

Table 1 shows that the teachers indicated they received sufficient support to do an effective job delivering the curriculum to the students. However, the majority reported the district provided more support to them than the school site to help them accomplish their jobs. Most of the teachers felt that they did not need additional training to be effective in their current positions.

### *Delivery of Services and Parent Communication*

As can be seen in Table 1, the teachers strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the pre-kindergarten program. Yet, a large percentage agreed that the service delivery system can be improved. Also, the majority of teachers in the program reported that they initiated contact with their parents either verbally or in writing at least monthly.

### *Correlation of Variables across Data*

Data were also analyzed using the Kendall's Tau(b) Correlation to determine if relationships existed between variables. When correlated using the Kendall's Tau(b), several of the variables showed positive relationships. The Kendall's Tau(b) correlation was used to estimate relationships because of the size of the data set and the variables are ordinal. Certain items showed a significant correlation at the .001 level. Variables 1, 2, 3, and 8 showed a significant positive correlation. These variables focused on the curriculum and the progress students made in the curriculum. The negative correlation among variables 1, 2, 3 and 10 documents the finding that the majority of teachers in this study felt that they were competent with the curriculum and their students were making progress within the curriculum. A significant relationship was shown between variables 2 and 13, both items related to the curriculum. There was also a positive relationship between variables 6 and 11 and variables 11 and 13, which dealt with support from the district and curriculum adequacy respectively.

### **Discussion**

The results in this study revealed that teachers are basically satisfied with the pre-kindergarten program. Findings indicated that teachers had a good understanding of the curriculum, how to implement it in their classroom, how to adapt it to meet individual student needs, and how to measure its adequacy for students. This is significant because teachers are the stakeholders in ensuring that learning takes place within the classroom, especially in the pre-school years when students are so dependent on them.

Teachers reported district support at a higher level than the school site. This may be occurring because district personnel provide professional development and peer mentoring for new teachers, assist teachers with record keeping, and give supplementary materials and resources above that of site administrators. Though teachers reported they were satisfied with the program, they strongly agreed the service could be improved. The majority of teachers reported making contact with parents at least on a monthly basis either verbally or in writing. This condition would be very difficult to replicate, especially in all public school programs. This phenomenon could be attributed to the size of the program, the age range of the population being served, and the fact that these children have disabilities. Parents picking up and dropping children off at school may facilitate this level of contact. Finally, since these children have been diagnosed with a disability at such a young age, parents and caregivers have taken several crucial steps to get to this point. Hence, they have already recognized their role in

the process and have established a line of communication with teachers. Also, parents and teachers are dependent on each other in an effort to generalize skills across settings. The majority of the teachers disagreed with the comment that they require more training to be effective in their position. Likewise, teachers overwhelmingly disagreed that they are confused about what is expected of them. Finally, teachers also indicated that they felt students were making progress, had time to individualize instruction, were able to measure student progress, and knew how to make adaptations for individual students. This finding indicated that teachers either entered the program with the pre-requisite knowledge necessary or obtained it soon after entering. The majority had four or more years in the field, indicating high turnover is not an issue in this program, which contributes to stability and effectiveness.

### Implications

Additional research needs to substantiate the reliability of the responses obtained. The results from this study clearly showed teachers, as a group, thought very highly of this program. The overall results of the program were positive, but it was not as strong as previously thought. A portion of teachers felt the delivery of services could be improved, which school and district level administrators should take into consideration.

### References

- Barnett, W. S., & Frede, E. C. (1993). Early childhood programs in the public schools: insight from a state survey. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 17 (3), 396-413.
- Barnett, D. W., Macmann, G. M., & Carey, K.T. (1992). Early intervention and the assessment of developmental skills: challenges and directions. *Topics In Early Childhood Special Education*, 12(1), 21-43.
- Bowe, F. G. (1995). Population estimates: birth-to-5 children with disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education*, 28(4),461-471.
- File, N., & Kontos, S. (1993). The relationship of program quality to children's intervention settings. *Topics In Early Childhood Special Education*. 13(1), 1-18.
- Florian, L. (1995). Part H early intervention program: legislative history and intent of the law. *Topics In Early Childhood Special Education*, 15(3), 247-262.
- Glascoc, F.P., & Byrne, K. E. (1993). The accuracy of three developmental screening tests. *The Journal of Early Intervention*, 17 (4), 368-379.
- Le Ager, C., & Shapiro, E. S. (1995). Template matching as a strategy for assessment of and intervention for preschool students with disabilities. *Topics In Early Childhood Special Education*, 15 (2), 187-218.
- McCullum, J.A., & Yates, T. J. (1994). Technical assistance for meeting early intervention personnel standards: statewide processes based on peer review. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 14(3), 295-310.
- Miller, P. (1991). Linking theory to intervention practices with preschoolers and their families: building program integrity. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 15(4), 315-325.
- Odom, S. L., McConnell, S. R., & Chandler, L. K. (1993). Acceptability and feasibility of classroom-based social interaction interventions for young children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 60(3), 226-236.
- Odom, S. L., McLean, M. E., Johnson, L.J., & LaMontagne, M. J. (1995). Recommended practices in early childhood special education: validation and current use. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 19(1), 1-17.