
Curiosity Corner Summary of Research: First Year Findings

Background

Following the landmark Abbott decision to provide free preschool to all three- and four-year-olds in the 30 Abbott Districts, the Success for All Foundation (SFAF) was asked by the New Jersey Department of Education to design, evaluate, and disseminate a comprehensive reform model for early childhood programs. SFAF responded with Curiosity Corner. In the 1999-2000 school year, researchers from SFAF visited classrooms and observed children's performance to assess the relationship between involvement in Curiosity Corner and learning outcomes. The following is a summary of the report generated from that research.

Research Approach

Our goal was to investigate the benefits of the Curiosity Corner program in light of real-world challenges (e.g., lack of certified early childhood educators, inadequate space for preschools, varying quality of settings). We used both classroom observations and standardized testing to compare the language abilities of children

in Curiosity Corner classrooms with those of children in preschools without the program. The sample of children studied included 169 three-year-olds in early childhood centers and 147 four-year-olds in public preschool classrooms. Of the children studied, 67.9% were African-American, 15.6% were European-American, 10.9% were Hispanic; 48.7% were female and 51.3% were male.

Measures and Research Process

We used the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R) to observe the classroom environments according to criteria set by early childhood experts not associated with SFAF. Subscales within the measure covered numerous elements, including Language and Reasoning, Child-Child Interactions, and Staff-Child Interactions. As a pretest (i.e., prior to any preschool exposure for the year), we administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test to measure children's receptive vocabulary. In the Spring of 2000, we retested children using three scales from the Mullen Scales of Early Learning: Expressive Language, Receptive Language, and Visual Reception. The first of these, Expressive Language, tests children's speaking abilities or abilities to verbalize in response to stimulus questions. Employing a broad range of tasks, the second scale, Receptive Language, measures the children's ability to process linguistic information (e.g., follow directions). The third scale, Visual Reception, tests skills related to visual discrimination (e.g., selecting identical pictures based on subtle details) and memory.



Findings

Incorporating statistical methods to reduce the likelihood of results being found by chance, our research indicated several important and encouraging differences between the experiences of children in Curiosity Corner sites and children in other programs in New Jersey. Overall, Curiosity Corner sites were rated higher than control sites on the ECERS-R, particularly the Language & Reasoning and Child-Child Interactions subscales. The results are consistent with developers' expectations that the program would positively impact children's language and literacy development, as well as promote greater positive social interactions among students. Additionally, according to performance on the Mullen Expressive Language Scale, Curiosity Corner three-year-olds showed statistically significant higher expressive language ability compared with children in classrooms without the program, which is consistent with the findings from the ECERS-R. Higher quality social interactions observed in Curiosity Corner sites may both stem from and contribute to children's expressive competencies.

In contrast to findings for expressive language, children in our program had scores similar to those in control sites on receptive language and visual reception. Control sites' relatively greater emphasis on teachers' direction and children's compliance within a more traditional model of classroom functioning may have contributed to the similar gains in receptive language.

The Curiosity Corner study signals the beginning of the Success for All Foundation's ongoing early learning research agenda. Based on these findings and a desire to assess the enduring impact of this comprehensive preschool program, we are in the process of conducting more evaluative research.

If you have any questions or would like a full-text version of this report (22 pp.), please contact Anne Chamberlain at 1-800-548-4998, ext. 2319.

