

Topic: **Head Start identification of children with disabilities and delays**

Barton, L. R., Spiker, D., & Williamson, C. (2012). Characterizing disability in Head Start programs: Not so clearcut. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27, 596-612.

Context

Head Start programs have had a longstanding commitment to serving children with developmental delays and disabilities. In fact, Head Start requires that 10% of their enrollment slots be reserved for children with disabilities or developmental delays. However, according to the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2000 data, only 6% of children with disabilities or developmental delays occupy those slots. This number varies depending on the criteria and the source of information used. A discrepancy exists within how children are identified and provided with necessary supports and services.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the study was to describe the percentage of children with disabilities and developmental delays enrolled in Head Start programs across the nation. Authors used FACES 2000 data from a national sample to identify three different subgroups of children who met alternative criteria for having a disability or development delay. Analyses served to assist Head Start programs in determining whether or not they were considering the three different sets of criteria effectively to identify children who may benefit from additional services and supports. Additionally, this study served to provide a greater understanding about characteristics of children enrolled in Head Start programs.

Alternative Criteria for Identifying Children with a Disability or Developmental Delay

The first subgroup identified was “professional concern.” Children included in this subgroup had been identified by a professional as having a special need or disability as indicated by parent report; completion of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for services was not

necessary included in this identification. Parents reported speech (62%) and language (29%) impairments as the main concern.

The second subgroup included the “preschool IEP” group. Children in this subgroup were identified as being enrolled in special education services as required by an IEP.

The third subgroup included children with “low language test scores” on a standardized test of receptive language at the beginning of preschool. Children scoring less than two standard deviations below the mean on either the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Third Edition (PPVT-III) or the Test de Vocabulario en Imagenes Peabody (TVIP).

Common Characteristics of Children with Delays and Disabilities Enrolled in Head Start

The final piece of this study involved identifying child and family characteristics associated with inclusion in one of the three subgroups. Analyses showed a higher percentage of African American children in the “low language test scores” subgroup. However, African American children were least likely to be included in the “preschool IEP” subgroup, which may indicate an underrepresentation of African American children enrolled in preschool special education services.

Conclusion

Findings indicated that the percentage of children identified with a disability or developmental delay varied based on criteria used. It was found that children who met any of the three subgroup criteria were at a significant risk for poorer outcomes in early literacy, social, and behavioral measures at entry to Head Start and at the end of kindergarten. Only a small portion identified as having a disability or

developmental delay received preschool special education support services.

There is a need for greater attention to what specific criteria are being used to identify children enrolled in Head Start programs and what barriers exist that prevent equal participation for all children who need additional supports. Further, more research is needed to evaluate how screening and assessments are conducted, reviewed, interpreted, discussed with parents, and acted upon.

Findings also suggested that many of the children classified under alternative criteria could have benefited from special education services and supports. Additional results noted that there are a large number of children who attend Head Start programs that may have significant development delays, including those from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. There is a need for more coordinated and integrated systems that assist programs with monitoring and assessing children who may be at risk for developmental delays and/or disabilities.

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About the ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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