

THE DILEMMA OF LIMITED PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE STEELTOWN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

THE DILEMMA OF LIMITED PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE STEELTOWN COMMUNITY

Catherine Skezas Lobaugh
University of Pittsburgh, Fall 2006

The purpose of this multi-perspectival qualitative study was to examine the reasons parents/primary caregivers residing in and around the Steeltown community choose to have their preschool age children participate or not participate in quality early childhood education programs. The goal of the researcher was to examine the early childhood experiences of some of the children from the Steeltown community who reside in either of the two subsidized housing projects and/or their neighborhoods.

The following research questions were formulated to examine the reasons parents/primary caregivers choose to have their preschool age children participate or not participate in quality early childhood programs, given the presence of these programs in the Steeltown community.

- 1) What are the early childhood programs available in the area?
- 2) What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, other?
- 3) What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?
- 4) On what basis is this type of early childhood care chosen by parents/primary caregivers?

- 5) How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?
- 6) What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?

Data was collected from interviews and focus groups of parents/primary caregivers and the school district parent involvement coordinator along with a review of school district documents regarding early childhood programs in the Steeltown area and local demographics.

The findings indicate that the communication system between parents/primary caregivers and early childhood education providers has had a major impact on participation or lack of participation in quality early childhood programs. The goals of Goals 2000 legislation, ensuring all children come to school ready to learn, and the goals of the No Child Left Behind legislation have influenced the focus on the provision of high quality early education programs for all children. The results of this study revealed that without an effective communication system, parents/primary caregivers have limited knowledge of school readiness, what quality early childhood programs offer, and that these programs are accessible.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Nicholas Jacob Skezas, and the spirit and driving force of my mother, Fifi Skarlis Skezas.

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This dissertation could not have been completed without the expertise and inspiration of so many who contributed their support, guidance, and love during this rigorous academic experience.

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Thank you to my dear friends and colleagues who offered support, encouragement, patience, and understanding. In particular, to one, who always reminds me that it is the little things in life that really matter.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP PAGE	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
DEDICATION	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
THE STEELTOWN STORY: TIGER PRIDE	4
School Story.....	5
Building A.....	6
Building B.....	7
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	12
WHY ARE THE EARLY YEARS SO CRITICAL?	12
The Abecedarian Project.....	16
WHAT IS SCHOOL READINESS AND WHY IS SCHOOL READINESS SO CRITICAL? ..	18
Reaching out	29
Reaching back.....	30
Reach with intensity.....	33
WHAT IS QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD AND WHY IS IT SO CRITICAL?	35
For Children.....	40
For Families	41
For Teachers, Curriculum, and Classrooms.....	41
WHY IS INTENSITY OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD SO CRITICAL?	42
Fiscal Strategies	44
Professional Preparation and Compensation Approaches	45
System and Program Strategies	46
WHAT IS A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENT?..	48
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.....	48

Education	49
Economic Performance	49
Crime Prevention	50
Health, Family, and Children.....	50
Cost Benefit Analysis	51
CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	53
CHAPTER 2 INTRODUCTION	57
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	59
Research Questions.....	59
METHODOLOGY	60
DEFINITIONS OF TERMS	65
DELIMITATIONS OF STUDY	67
CHAPTER 3 PRESENTATION OF DATA, SUMMARY OF THE STUDY, ANALYSIS OF THE DATA, AND FINDINGS BASED ON THE UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES .	68
PRESENTATION OF THE DATA.....	68
Overview.....	68
Connection to Conceptual Framework	68
Field Procedures	70
Methodology.....	70
Parent Involvement Coordinator.....	71
Focus Group and Interview Participants.....	71
Pilot Study Focus Group Participants	72
Questions	72
Questions for Parent Involvement Coordinator	73
Questions for Parents/Primary Caregivers in Focus Groups	74
Questions for Individual Parents/Primary Caregivers During Interviews	75
Guide For The Report.....	76
Collection and Results of the Data	76
Interview of the Parent Involvement Coordinator	78
Parents/Primary Caregiver Focus Groups.....	85
Parent Interviews	94

SUMMARY OF THE DATA.....	112
Outline of the Study	112
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA BASED ON THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS	116
Knowledge of Early Childhood Programs.....	116
Research Question 1: What are the early childhood programs in the area?	116
Knowledge of Early Childhood Programs and Basis for the Type of Early Childhood Care	123
Basis for the Type of Early Childhood Care and the Level of School Readiness Based on the	
Type of Early Childhood Experiences.....	126
Rubric for Data Organizer Question 1 (Research Question 5)	130
Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses and Focus Group Responses.....	130
FINDINGS BASED ON THE UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES	132
Research Findings.....	132
SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS	133
CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE,	
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER	
RESEARCH, AND DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE	135
CONCLUSIONS.....	135
Communication.....	136
Knowledge of School Readiness (KSR).....	137
Parent Separation Anxiety (PSA)	138
Accessibility (A).....	139
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE	140
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	144
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	145
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE.....	146
REFERENCES	152
APPENDIX - MISCELLANEOUS LETTERS OF APPROVAL AND CONSENT.....	156

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – School Readiness Levels Among Children Enrolled in Early Care and Education Programs within 12 Months Before Kindergarten.....	23
Table 2 – Low-income Children by the Type of Care Before Kindergarten	25
Table 3 - School Readiness Skills for Low-income Children by the Type of Care Before Kindergarten	26
Table 4 – Organizational Framework	59
Table 5 – Organizational Protocol	62
Table 6 – Research Questions for Participants	73
Table 7 – Research Questions for the Parent Involvement Coordinator	78
Table 8 – Research Questions for the Focus Groups.....	85
Table 9 – Research Questions for Parent Interviews	94
Table 10 – Interview Data Organizer.....	97
Table 11 – Research Participants’ Knowledge of Early Childhood Programs in the Steeltown Community	117
Table 12 - Expectations of Research Participants.....	119
Table 13 - Types of Early Childhood Programs Research Participants Enrolled Their Children	125
Table 14 - Basis for Selection of ECC of Focus Groups and Interview Participants	127

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Building A.....	7
Figure 2 - Building B	9
Figure 3 - Effects of Abbott Preschool on Entering Kindergarteners' Oral Language Skills.....	21
Figure 4 - Effects of Abbott Preschool on Entering Kindergarteners' Early Literacy Skills.....	22
Figure 5 - Letter and Word Recognition for Children in Georgia Pre-K, Private Preschools, and Head Start.....	27
Figure 6 - Organizational Protocol	64
Figure 7 - Reasons for Enrollment.....	81
Figure 8 - Under School Age Children	82
Figure 9 - Type of Pre-K Childcare Experience	84
Figure 10 - How Parents Learned About Programs.....	88
Figure 11 - What These Programs Provide.....	89
Figure 12 - Concerns About Enrolling.....	90
Figure 13 - Types of ECC.....	91
Figure 14 - Basis for Choosing Type of ECC.....	92
Figure 15 - Research Participants' Awareness Level.....	99
Figure 16 - Types of ECC.....	101
Figure 17 - Basis for ECC.....	103
Figure 18 – Participant’s Preschool Experience	104
Figure 19 - Enrollment of Older Children	105
Figure 20 - Reasons for Selection.....	106
Figure 21 - Same/Similar ECC	107
Figure 22 - What ECC Programs Provide.....	110
Figure 23 - Age of Preschooler At Enrollment.....	111

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Quality early childhood education is being acknowledged as a catalyst for the future academic success of our nation's children. Sadly, the disparity in its availability is disheartening. The equity issue of the quality of and access to early childhood education in the United States (U.S.) mirrors the K-12 public education system as being that of the haves and have-nots. Resources to support not only access to quality early education programs, but their utilization, depend on geographic residence, family income, educational levels of parents, and the value placed on education not only by the parents but by the greater community and all who have a stake in the future.

Some evidence demonstrates that many children from low-income families, who have not participated in quality early childhood programs, begin the K-12 public school system up to two years behind their advantaged peers in verbal literacy skills, and non-cognitive skills.

Participation in quality early childhood education programs may offer an important opportunity to narrow student preparation gaps (school readiness) and eventually student achievement gaps before children begin their traditional K-12 public school education.

This researcher is of the belief that these are the same achievement gaps targeted by the U. S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* ("Brown v. Board of Education", 1954). The Court's landmark decision in 1954 attempted the daunting task of eliminating the difference in student performance based on race, ethnicity, and the underlying effects of poverty. This decision places the burden on states to establish equity within their educational systems. State

and federal resources have been used to equalize educational opportunities in K-12 school programs. However, little attention has been given to early childhood education.

Thirty years after the Supreme Court handed down Brown, Congress enacted Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227) to broach this early childhood concern. The first goal in the Act (Sec. 102) reads as follows:

All children in America will start school ready to learn.

This goal was intended to reflect the nation's increased awareness that early childhood experiences influence school performance and expressed a deep concern for the way in which young children and families were supported. Yet ten years later, resources remain limited. The preschool needs of half the nation's three and four year old children are still being ignored. It is the opinion of this researcher that without intervention during the preschool years, children from low-income families will remain at an academic disadvantage throughout their public education and ultimately, this will impact their future success.

Over 50 years have passed since Brown attempted to eliminate educational inequality based on poverty and racial and ethnic distinction. This researcher believes that the value of early childhood education is not embedded in the core beliefs of this society. The efforts of 50 years (filled with numerous court cases, legislation, resources, and sanctions) have not met the eradication goals the Court intended. Although currently 40 states have at least one state-funded preschool program, this growth has been primarily based on state policy mandates.

The value of early childhood education has not penetrated the core belief system of this society. It cannot be embedded in the social consciences by executive order, judicial decisions, or

legislation. It can be embedded by identifying stakeholders who share a belief system that supports equal access to high quality early childhood education for all children and by building collaboration among these stakeholders. This could enable stakeholders to then begin to define the task and process, and allocate resources to penetrate this belief system.

Unfortunately, it has taken the No Child Left Behind Act ("No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)", 2001a), with its focus on achievement gaps in subgroups and the realization and identification of the future economic impact of access to high quality early childhood education to bring it to the forefront of public scrutiny. Until recently, early childhood education has never been examined for its return on investment. This investment in the future goes beyond the cognitive skills associated with academic success. It encompasses social and emotional issues as well. It includes the potential earnings and tax contributions of future generations of children as they move into adulthood. As the level of educational attainment and human capital increases, so does the potential for investment and thus productivity. This translates into private gain through higher earning potential. Consequently, this earning potential converts into higher tax contributions and a reduction in welfare reliance. Other returns on investment include lower incidence of criminal activity (ensuring the welfare of the general public) and a decrease in the burdens and costs on taxpayers and the judicial system.

This researcher is not concerned as to why early childhood education issues have arrived at the doorstep of public awareness. However, as educators we should assume the responsibility for and be a critical part of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of accessible high quality early childhood education programs, thus assuring their future sustainability.

THE STEELTOWN STORY: TIGER PRIDE

Steeltown, Pennsylvania is situated at the confluence of the Laurel and Pennsylvania Rivers, fourteen miles southeast of the City of William Pitt. It is a community proud of its traditions, and its diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Like many other western Pennsylvania communities, Steeltown thrived and flourished during the height of the coal and steel industries. It was a close-knit community with decent housing and job opportunities and retail businesses. However, as these industries began to diminish, so did the economic opportunities and benefits.

As a community, the city did not explore the resources and investment opportunities those industries may once have provided with regard to potential economic/educational development for the future. Unfortunately, the citizens of Steeltown were unprepared for the consequences created by the loss of those industries. As a result, thousands of men and women found themselves unemployed. This resulted in approximately 50% of the population being forced to move out of the area in pursuit of employment. Over the last 25 years, this population out flux has translated into a severe economic down turn for the Steeltown community. Steeltown has become an area with a disproportionate number of vacated houses and businesses that have fallen into disrepair. Property values have plummeted and homes that were once occupied by working middle class families are now occupied by families of low socioeconomic status.

One might suspect that based on the current status of the community, the educational system has been affected, and indeed it has felt the effects of this economic upheaval, but certainly not to the point of being rendered unproductive. Through partnerships with the citizens of Steeltown, the Steeltown Area School District (SASD) Board of School Directors and the entire school district staff, local businesses and organizations, and the nearby higher education facilities, the local

school system strive to provide a comprehensive, quality educational program for the children of the community.

Throughout its long history, the SASD has sought to be forward-looking, and provide “whatever it takes” to ensure a quality education for all of its students. Many of the residents of the community are graduates of SASD and share this core belief. The community of Steeltown stems from this long line of individuals who are committed to restoring and revitalizing this once thriving area and pursuing excellence in education for all children in the SASD. The pride of the Steeltown community can best be articulated by the expression used by SASD alumni (using the district mascot) “...once a tiger, always a tiger...”

School Story

The SASD serves the communities of Anyburg, Steeltown, South Rouen, Rouen, and Every Boro. The organizational grade configuration of the district consists of three elementary buildings, Grades K-3; two intermediate buildings, Grades 4-6; one middle school building, Grades 7-8; and one high school, Grades 9-12. The district houses its own Technology Center and a recent addition of an alternative education school.

The students from the five municipalities served by SASD represent extreme diversities in income, employment, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. These diversities are reflected in student achievement demonstrated in the disaggregated information displayed by the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSAs). Disaggregated information on student achievement of the fifth grade overall results in reading of the 2005 PSSAs from the two intermediate buildings will be used to express the extreme achievement diversity of the student

population. For reasons of privacy and anonymity, the two intermediate schools will be identified as Building A and Building B.

Building A








The student population of Building A serves students within the Steeltown city limits and Anyburg. A large number of African American students live within the City of Steeltown while the students from Anyburg are primarily of white ethnic distinction. Over 75% of the student population is economically disadvantaged and just over 50% are African American. Only 34% of all students scored in the proficient and above category. Only 18% of the African American population scored at the proficient or above level compared to 51% of the white ethnic students; 28% of the economically disadvantaged students scored at the proficient or above level.

There are various early childcare facilities within the city limits. But there are only 2.5 Head Start programs and 1 other program, which is child centered with some type of early childhood curriculum.

The purpose of this section of the report card is to show how students performed compared with the goals of No Child Left Behind. All tables on this report include students who were enrolled in this school for a full academic year. These numbers may not match the results in the Assessment section of the Report Card.

This School's Overall Results in Reading

This data table captures performance and participation results of students overall and by disaggregated group who took the PSSA In Grade 5.

Student Group ¹	Students Assessed		Percentage of students Proficient and above:	Percentage of students in each Performance Level:				
	#	%	State Target: 54%	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced	
All Students	219	100%	34% 		39%	26%	28%	6%
Gender								
Male	112	100%	30% 		47%	22%	24%	6%
Female	107	100%	38% 		31%	31%	32%	7%
Ethnicity								
White	103	100%	51% 		28%	20%	42%	10%
Black	111	100%	18% 		50%	32%	15%	3%
Latino/Hispanic	—	—	—		—	—	—	—
Asian	—	—	—		—	—	—	—
Native American	—	—	—		—	—	—	—
Multiracial	—	—	—		—	—	—	—
Other Groups								
IEP	45	100%	24% 		62%	13%	18%	7%
Limited English Proficient	—	—	—		—	—	—	—
Migrant	—	—	—		—	—	—	—
Economically Disadvantaged	161	100%	28% 		45%	27%	23%	5%

NOTE:

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

— Indicates fewer than 10 students in a group. To provide meaningful results and to protect the privacy of individual students, data are printed only when the total number of students in a group is at least 10.

¹ There can be overlap among the groups since a student may belong to more than one of these groups.

Figure 1 - Building A

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the disaggregated information of student achievement for Building A on the 2005 PSSAs (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment).

Building B

The student population of Building B serves students from Every Boro, South Rouen, and Rouen. The ethnicity of these municipalities is primarily of white ethnic distinction. Building B also serves the entire Grade 4-6 student population from one housing project in the City of

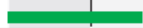
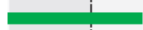

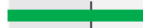
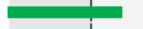
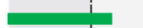
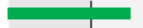
Steeltown and part of that same grade level of students from the other housing project. Nearly 49% of the student population is economically disadvantaged and 22% is African American, but 87% of all students scored in the proficient and above category. Only 74% of the African American population scored at the proficient or above level compared to 92% of students of white ethnic distinction; 80% of the economically disadvantaged students scored at the proficient or above level.

There are several early childcare facilities within the limits of the municipalities represented. Many are child centered with some type of early childcare curriculum.

The purpose of this section of the report card is to show how students performed compared with the goals of No Child Left Behind. All tables on this report include students who were enrolled in this school for a full academic year. These numbers may not match the results in the Assessment section of the Report Card.

This School's Overall Results in Reading

This data table captures performance and participation results of students overall and by disaggregated group who took the PSSA in Grades 5 and 8.

Student Group ¹	Students Assessed		Percentage of students Proficient and above:	Percentage of students in each Performance Level:			
	#	%	State Target: 84%	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
All Students	103	99%	87% 	4%	9%	65%	22%
Gender							
Male	53	98%	87% 	4%	9%	66%	21%
Female	49	100%	90% 	2%	8%	65%	24%
Ethnicity							
White	79	100%	92% 	1%	6%	65%	28%
Black	23	96%	74% 	9%	17%	70%	4%
Latino/Hispanic	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Asian	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Native American	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Multiracial	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other Groups							
IEP	15	94%	67% 	13%	20%	40%	27%
Limited English Proficient	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Migrant	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Economically Disadvantaged	50	98%	80% 	6%	14%	66%	14%

NOTE:

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

— Indicates fewer than 10 students in a group. To provide meaningful results and to protect the privacy of individual students, data are printed only when the total number of students in a group is at least 10.

¹ There can be overlap among the groups since a student may belong to more than one of these groups.

Figure 2 - Building B

Figure 2 graphically displays the disaggregated information of student achievement of Building B based on the 2005 PSSAs (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment).

Access and available enrollment space to quality early childhood programs may not be the only reasons for such disparity between the two buildings, however they are viable contributing factors. Many reports have documented the achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status and

ethnicity. At least part of these student achievement gaps can be traced to preparation gaps caused by the wide disparity in the availability of quality early learning experiences for children before they enter school (*Closing the achievement gaps; removing the barriers to preschool in Connecticut*, 2003). Many children who do not receive a quality preschool experience typically demonstrate oral language weaknesses and patterns that create later problems in reading and writing (Bowman et al., 2000).

On a Personal Note

I recently visited the new alternative education site in the SASD. The site houses K-12 students who have been referred to this school primarily because of disruptive behavioral issues. Having to provide an alternative site for these children coupled with the knowledge that I, as a building principal, was influential in placing some of the primary children there, is quite disturbing in itself. But, seeing some of the high school age children is what gave me great pause.

As a first grade teacher in the district for many years, I was the first grade teacher for two of the twelfth grade children attending this alternative education site. As a teacher I had serious concerns about the destiny of some of my children over the years, but to my sad surprise the two students who I encountered that day were not in that category. Yet there they were! I realized that these students were exposed to and charged to the care of not only myself but to many of my colleagues over the years. Many of my colleagues in the SASD are of the highest caliber with regard to instruction and by far a most caring group of individuals. These students were exposed to many of these individuals who provided nurturing learning environments for them. So what happened to these students? Realizing that there are many factors that contributed to their final public school destiny, I wondered what impact their early childhood experiences might have had on this their final school experience. With the brain research that has documented how stressful early childhood experiences limit brain development, these children's thinking may never have moved out of their brain stem. It then occurred to me that possibly no amount of K-12 high quality instruction or nurturing learning environment could override the early childhood experiences that had been imprinted on these children. Therefore, it is imperative that we get to these children and their families during those preschool years when the majority of brain development occurs.

Investment in human capital breeds economic success not only for those being educated, but also for the overall economy (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). The potential quality of life and contributions a child can make to society as an adult can be traced back to his/her early years of life. Without the support of a nurturing environment, a child is more likely to do poorly in

school, not complete high school, have limited employment opportunities, receive welfare benefits, and commit crime. Given the mounting evidence of both the long and short term costs of school 'unreadiness' in loss of human potential and educational opportunity, much more needs to be done to close the achievement gap early in a child's learning experiences.

The community of Steeltown failed to seize an opportunity to explore future diversified economic/educational opportunities and investment in human capital that may have been available at the height of the coal and steel industries. But Steeltown has currently found itself at another economic crossroad: to continue the downward economic trend or view and examine education as an economic development strategy. Collaborative partnerships across the nation are moving beyond the usual suspects as allies (Bruner, 2004a) to promote an early childhood agenda that improves school readiness and includes these partnerships in their local economic development strategies for their longitudinal impact. In planning for the next phase of economic development, identifying and investing in educational initiatives and a focus on quality early childhood programs may yield yet the highest public returns, that is, a highly educated workforce.

The Steeltown area could serve as a model for distressed communities by innovative planning for economic development that includes quality early childhood programs. Investment in quality early childhood programs could provide support to parents to supplement and enhance their ability to provide a solid foundation for their children. It could also provide their children, from birth through kindergarten enrollment, opportunities that promote healthy growth and development and school readiness.

Equal access to high quality early childhood programs has the potential to assure equity in school readiness for all children, thus leveling the playing field at the starting gate of the K-12 system. Consequently this would give all children in the SASD community the opportunity to be successful and contribute to society. With such forward thinking, the ‘pride of Steeltown’ may have the opportunity not only to aspire to greatness, but make it a reality.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

WHY ARE THE EARLY YEARS SO CRITICAL?

Studies in neurobiology, neurodevelopment, and early intervention demonstrate that the years from birth to five are critically important for brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The accelerating pace of research in neurological and behavioral science and the development of new research technologies have advanced the understanding and knowledge of the brain and its development exponentially. Brain development and psychological development involve continuous interactions between a child and the external environment—or, more accurately, a hierarchy of environments, extending from the level of the individual body cells to the most obvious boundary of the skin (Bransford et al., 1999). This new knowledge has provided more understanding about the influence of genetics and environment on total development- the “nature vs. nurture” debate.

During these earliest years children respond to the stimuli around them, nurture as well as nature matters (Bruner et al., 2005). Children have essential and universal needs as summarized in the Revised and Expanded Toolkit from the State Early Childhood Technical Assistance Network (Bruner et al., 2005):

- Competent and confident parenting that is constant and consistent throughout the early years of life (at least one, and preferably two, parent figures who provide nurturing, protection, and stimulation and with whom the child bonds);
- Health and nutrition (adequate food and exercise for physical and mental growth, protection against and response to disease and injury, early identification and treatment of any special health conditions);
- Guidance and instruction (help and practice in developing large and small motor skills, pre-literacy, cognitive skills, and the ability to relate with adults and other children);
- Constant, stable, appropriate supervision (continuous adult oversight and support that enables the child to safely explore the environment).

High quality learning environments are absolutely essential for infants and young children.

Stimulating and enriching environments encourage infants to be fully engaged in the world around them and literally wire a baby's brain. This engagement enhances their future growth and learning. Restrictive or punitive environments cause infants to withdraw and limit their potential growth and development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). A simple explanation of the functions of the four major parts of the brain will explain how brain activity relates to behavior and learning.

The brain stem is located at the base of the brain and serves two functions. It controls heart rate and breathing and survival functioning. When a child feels threatened or fearful, he or she will revert to functioning in this area of the brain to survive. The cerebellum, located above the brain stem, is associated with movement. It has connections with the parts of the brain related to abstract thinking and mental focus. Without movement and regular exercise, the connections are weaker and this lessens the child's ability to focus. The limbic area is the emotional center of the

brain. It secretes a substance, cortisol, into the blood stream that affects how one feels or acts. This is the area that releases adrenaline during stressful situations as well. The cerebrum deals with thought processes. Parts of the cerebrum are connected to sensory input and develop early. The frontal cortex is located at the top and front of the cerebrum. This is the area where abstract thought occurs and is not fully developed until a child is eight years old. The surface of the cerebrum and the cerebellum are coated with a layer of tissue called the cortex, commonly referred to as gray matter. The cortex is gray because the nerves in this area lack the insulation that makes most other parts of the brain appear to be white (Brain basics: Know your brain, 2005). Most of the actual information processing in the brain takes place in the cerebral cortex. The folds in the brain add to its surface area and therefore increase the amount of gray matter and the quantity of information that can be processed (Bransford et al., 1999).

A neuron is a nerve cell that receives information from other nerve cells and projects that information to other nerve cells, while other nerve cells project it back to the parts of the body that interact with the environment, i.e. muscles (Bransford et al., 1999). When babies are born, they have almost all of the neurons they will ever have, more than 100 billion of them (NAIC, 2001). Each neuron first resembles a young tree before it develops roots and branches and does not communicate with other neurons until it is stimulated. Once stimulation occurs, the neurons begin to branch out and neurons begin to communicate with each other. The more communication that occurs, the more branching that occurs, and the denser the forest of neurons becomes (Lessen-Firestone, 1999). No new neurons are created, but the cortex becomes thicker because of the extensive network of branches and roots that has developed. The junctions through which this stimulation (and now information) passes are called synapses. The wiring of the brain is created through the formation of these synapses. Therefore it has been determined

that the “wiring” of a child’s brain is not determined before birth, but is in direct response to the environmental input the child receives after he or she is born (Lessen-Firestone, 1999).

“People offer the critical inputs for infant development- food and physical safety, comfort and reassurance, playthings and challenges, language and social feed back. More than anything else, relationships matter to babies”(Drummond & Seid, 2001). Brain growth occurs most quickly and easily during the first three years of life. During this time normally developed children learn to think, speak, and perform sophisticated movements and build interpersonal relationships.

Positron Emission Topography (PET) scans comparing the brains of healthy and neglected three year-olds show that this growth occurs as a function of the environment rather than heredity (Lessen-Firestone, 1999). Throughout this three-year period, these connections multiply as new growth appears with new experience and stimulus. After the age of three, these connections are refined, clipped back, and only those that are well utilized and meaningfully linked remain.

For normal growth and development of the neural cortex to occur, a child needs to feel emotionally secure in warm stable relationships. Consequently for children who are stressed, fearful, or insecure, the limbic area of the brain actually prevents learning from occurring. This is due to the secretion of cortisol from the limbic system into the bloodstream. When it circulates through the body and washes over the neural (thinking) cortex, it prevents neural connections from being formed and reinforced. Children who are stressed cannot benefit from even prime learning and stimulating environments. They revert to functioning in the lower area of the brainstem, unable to use the higher thinking part. These children use the ‘fight or flight’ mechanisms to cope with their situation. If during the first two years of life children live under stressful situations for significant periods of time, high levels of cortisol are released and the

development of the brain is altered. These children adapt to living in the brain stem rather than the neural cortex. By living in their brain stems, they view each interaction as one that threatens their survival and respond in an aggressive manner.

This brain knowledge and understanding offers reasons to provide environmental situations and stimulation that will create optimal neural connections in the cortex so as to promote an intellectual and emotional foundation for all children. The importance of high quality, educational childcare from early infancy is evidenced in the Abecedarian Project (NAEYC, 1999).

The Abecedarian Project

This project was a carefully controlled study in which 57 infants from low-income families were randomly assigned to receive early intervention in a high quality childcare setting and 54 were in a non-treated control group. This degree of scientific control gives investigators greater confidence that differences between the treated and untreated individuals can be attributed to the intervention itself, rather than to differences among treated and untreated families. The Abecedarian study provides scientific evidence that early childhood education significantly improves the scholastic success and educational attainments of poor children even into adulthood.

The treated children received full-time educational intervention in a high quality childcare setting from infancy through age 5. Each child had an individualized prescription of educational activities consisting of “games” that were incorporated into his or her day. These activities addressed social, emotional, and cognitive development but gave particular emphasis to language.

The treated and untreated children were initially comparable with respect to scores on infant mental and motor tests. However, from the age of 18 months and through the completion of the childcare program, children in the intervention group had significantly higher scores on mental tests than children in the control group.

The Abecedarian study began treatment in early infancy, emphasizing the importance of providing a learning environment for children from the very beginning of life. Every child deserves a good start in an environment that is safe, healthy, emotionally supportive, and cognitively stimulating. Legislators, policymakers, and educators have focused their attention on school readiness to create these environmental circumstances.

School readiness is to include both children's academic and social skills as they enter school and "ready schools," meaning the school's preparedness to serve all children (Early, 2004). This ready schools concept focuses on young children's school transitions. But the key ingredients to a successful transition are activities and events (over and above preschool and school programs) that are designed to overcome the discontinuities that may disrupt children's learning and development (Love et al., 1992). Ready schools (Pianta et al., 1999) have three characteristics:

- they reach out, linking families, preschool settings and communities with schools;
- they reach backward in time, making connections before the first day of school;
- they reach with appropriate intensity.

Therefore, school readiness goes beyond academic and social skills and includes the establishment of a system that builds relationships and resources for children as they enter school.

WHAT IS SCHOOL READINESS AND WHY IS SCHOOL READINESS SO CRITICAL?

Responsibility for school readiness lies not with children, but with the adults who care for them and the systems that support them (NGA, 2005). In the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227) the first goal in the Act (Sec. 102) reads as follows:

All children in America will start school ready to learn.

In 1991, the National School Readiness Task Force issued a report to encourage and guide public policy and community efforts to achieve Goal #1. Central to this report is a redefinition of school readiness (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1991):

- School readiness involves not only academic knowledge and skills, but also physical health, self-confidence, and social competence.
- School readiness is not determined solely by the abilities and capacities of young children. It is shaped and developed by people and environments. Further, “getting ready for school involves helping children in the context of families and improving programs in terms of the morale and skill of their staff members.”
- School readiness is not determined solely by the quality of early childhood programs. Readiness also depends on the expectations and capacities of teachers and elementary schools, including factors such as developmentally and culturally appropriate practice, class size, access to technology, and staff development.
- School readiness is also the responsibility of communities, because they have a stake in and an obligation to support families in the development of healthy young children.

No Child Left Behind ("No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)", 2001b) is one of the most powerful pieces of legislation to enter the education arena this past decade. It has brought educational accountability to the forefront of public awareness. The mandates of NCLB expect that all students be proficient in reading and math by the middle of the next decade. NCLB also focuses on the achievement gaps in the subgroups of the student population. It has prompted educators to examine and study past and current instructional practices. Educational objectives and levels of mastery are being revisited and curriculum is being rewritten. Consequently, educational expectations require students at each grade level to master skills in reading and math in earlier grades. Even students entering kindergarten are expected to meet early childhood educational standards in preparation for school readiness and to assure future student achievement.

Several studies have shown statistically significant positive effects of early childhood education on students' performance on standardized achievement tests. These include the North Carolina Abecedarian Project, where the differences in reading scores were large, with large to moderate differences in math scores (Masse & Barnett, 2003), the Ypsilanti/High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, 2002), the Abbott Preschool Program (Lamy Esposito et al., 2004-05), the Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program (Reynolds, 1999), the State of Maryland Children Entering School Ready to Learn- School Readiness Information: 2003-04 School Year by State and County (Maryland State Dept. of Education, 2004), and Report of the Findings from the Early Childhood Study at Georgia State University (Henry *et al.*, 2003).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool was a preschool intervention during the 1960s to improve the personal and economic opportunities for a small group of three- and four- year old children in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The Ypsilanti study is a scientific experiment that has identified both short-

and long-term effects of a high quality preschool education program for young children living in poverty. They identified a sample of 123 low-income African American children who were assessed to be at high risk of school failure and randomly assigned 58 of them to a program group that received a high quality preschool program at ages three and four, and 65 to another group that received no preschool program. The program group significantly outperformed the no-program group on various intellectual and language tests from their preschool years up to age seven. Because of the random assignment strategy, children's preschool experience remains the best explanation for the subsequent group differences.

Changes in the workforce and demands from parents for high-quality childcare, federal and state education reform efforts, and local initiatives are focusing attention on high-quality early childhood education as a critical component of school readiness and educational equity (Brown, 2003). Children enrolling in kindergarten come from a variety of prekindergarten childcare experiences (Exchange, 2002). The experiences range from parental home care to academic preschools. Prekindergarten childcare experiences, prior to kindergarten entry, determine school readiness. Prekindergarten reading readiness skills vary with the type of prekindergarten childcare experiences.

This is demonstrated in the results of the Abbott Preschool Program. This program was designed to prepare children to succeed in school. Its emphasis was on programs that offered high-quality learning experiences for all three and four year olds. The research design implemented provides a stronger more direct means of measuring the effects of the Abbott preschool program on entering kindergartners' academic and social skills. This design employs a regression-discontinuity statistical design to measure the impact of preschool programs on kindergarteners'

skills. This statistical design allows for the comparison of preschool and kindergarten children as if they were one same-age cohort, distributing their age ranges around the birth date cut-off for kindergarten enrollment. For example, in a district with an age cut-off of October 1, a child who turns five on September 29 will be enrolled in kindergarten while a child who turns five on October 1 will be enrolled in preschool. Their difference in age may be only hours. Selection bias is minimized, as both children have parents who enrolled them in preschool. Thus the younger child is the comparison for the older child. When, early in the school year, a comparison is made between the kindergarteners who attended a preschool program with the preschoolers who have just started the program, the difference between the groups can be attributed to the effects of the preschool program on the kindergarteners. Preliminary findings on the effects of Abbott preschool on kindergarteners' academic skills are presented below (Lamy Esposito *et al.*, 2004-05).

The study evidenced the effects of the preschool program on measures of language and literacy skills.

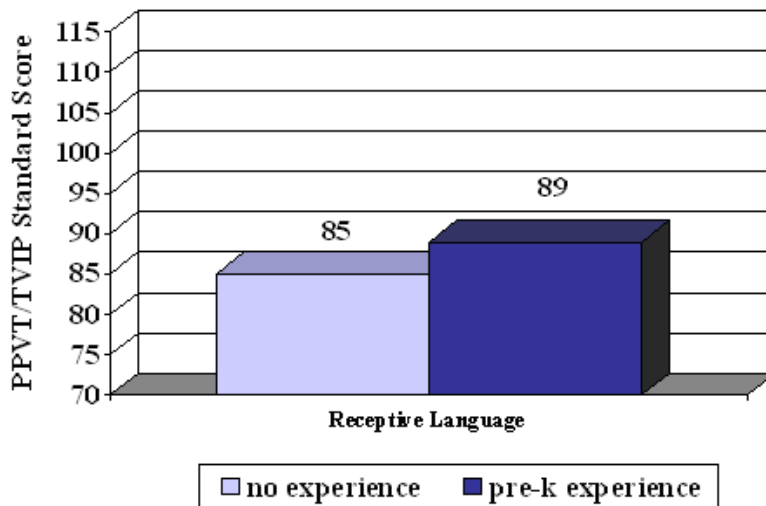


Figure 3 - Effects of Abbott Preschool on Entering Kindergarteners' Oral Language Skills

Figure 3 displays the statistically significant ($p < .04$) effect of preschool attendance on average receptive vocabulary scores as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT-#) and the Test de Vocabulario en Imágenes Peabody (TVIP) for Spanish speaking children. This four-point difference represents a difference of nearly four months in vocabulary development.

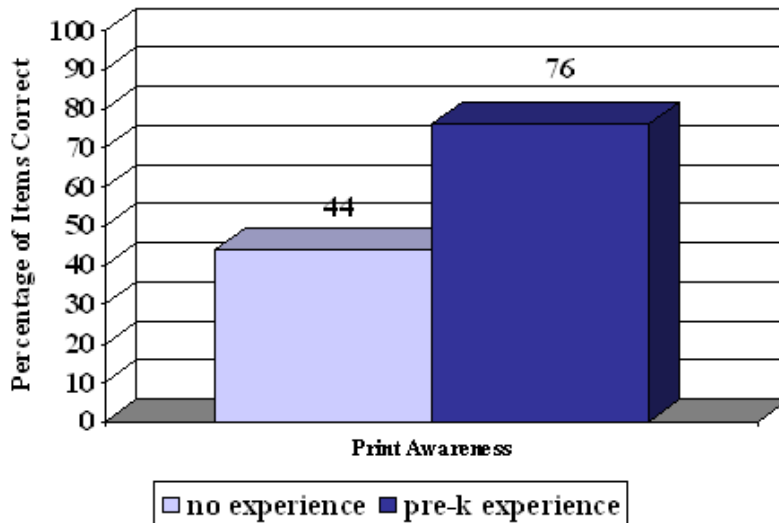


Figure 4 - Effects of Abbott Preschool on Entering Kindergarteners' Early Literacy Skills

Figure 4 displays the effects of early literacy skills in print awareness of entering kindergarteners in the Abbott Preschool study.

Early literacy skills were measured with the Print Awareness subtest of the Preschool-Comprehensive Test of Phonological and Print Processing (Pre-CTOPP). This subtest measures children's ability to distinguish words and letters from pictures, and measures the extent to which children know that letters have distinct names, shapes, and sound associations. The study found a highly statistically significant ($p < .000$) effect on Print Awareness scores.

The Chicago Child-Parent Center Program (CPC) is a center-based, pre-school and early intervention program that offers comprehensive family-support services as well as educational-support services (Reynolds, 2001). The study began in 1985 with 1,539 at risk preschool and kindergarten children. Ninety-two percent were African American and seventy percent lived below the poverty line. Students who attended the CPC had greater levels of school readiness at ages five and six.

The state of Maryland also studied the effects of early childhood programs on school readiness. They disaggregated the information based on the predominant types of prekindergarten programs children attended. Readiness skills are identified by three categories: full readiness, approaching readiness, and developing readiness. The following table displays the relationships of school readiness skills of children in the state of Maryland with one predominant type of early care experience. The analysis for children who were exclusively in one type of prior care has been included in the report, Children Entering School Ready to Learn- School Readiness Information: 2003-04 School Year by State and County.

Table 1 – School Readiness Levels Among Children Enrolled in Early Care and Education Programs within 12 Months Before Kindergarten

Type of Prior Care	Total Number	Composite Results(Percentage of Kindergarten Students)		
		Full	Approaching	Developing
Childcare Center	5,527	59	36	4
Family Childcare	1,695	57	37	6
Head Start	4,005	45	47	9
Prekindergarten	16,796	57	38	5
Non-public nursery	6,779	74	25	1
Home/Informal Care	8,763	46	43	11
Total	43,565			

Key: Full=Full Readiness; App=Approaching Readiness; Dev=Developing Readiness

Table 1 represents the school readiness levels among children enrolled in early care and education programs within 12 months before kindergarten. The numbers are based on the total number of students with composite scores. The composite scores indicate a significant variance in the school readiness levels among children who have been enrolled in early care and education programs and the type of care within 12 months before they started kindergarten. For instance, almost three out of four children (74) from non-public nursery programs bring the school readiness skills for meeting the curricular expectations in kindergarten, while less than half of Head Start children (45%) were evaluated by their teachers as having the needed school readiness skills. Both children from childcare centers (59%) and prekindergarten programs (57%) perform as well as the kindergarten population as a whole. The numbers are based on the total number of students with composite scores (Maryland State Dept. of Education, 2004).

Children who attend center care or preschool programs enter school more ready to learn, but both the share of children enrolled in these programs and the quality of care they receive, differ by socioeconomics (Magnuson, 2004-05).

In the table that follows, low-income children represent children who are eligible for free and reduced priced meals. The percentage represents the percentage of children who only had one type of prior early childhood care experience.

Table 2 – Low-income Children by the Type of Care Before Kindergarten

Type of Prior Care	Number of Low-income Children	Total Number	Percentage
Childcare Center	1,052	5,527	19.0%
Family Childcare	630	1,695	37.2%
Head Start	2,008	4,005	50.1%
Prekindergarten	4,886	16,796	29.1%
Non-public Nursery	459	6,779	6.8%
Home/Informal Care	3,638	8,763	41.5%
Total	12,673	43,565	29.1%

Based on the information in Table 2, Children Entering School Ready to Learn- School Readiness Information: 2003-04 School Year by State and County reports:

- kindergarteners who came from prekindergarten are four times as likely to be low-income than those from nursery programs;
- entering kindergarteners coming from Head Start were seven times more likely to be from low-income families than children who were enrolled in non-public nursery programs;
- kindergarteners who had no regulated early care and education experience (i.e., those who had home or informal care) were six times more likely than nursery school children to be from low-income families (Maryland State Dept. of Education, 2004).

The results in the next table indicate the school readiness skills for low-income children with prior care experience are significantly different from the results for all kindergarteners.

Table 3 - School Readiness Skills for Low-income Children by the Type of Care Before Kindergarten

Type of Prior Care	Composite Results for all Kindergarteners			Composite Results for low-income Kindergarteners			Difference		
	Full	App	Dev	Full	App	Dev	Full	App	Dev
Childcare Center	59	36	4	45	48	7	-14	+12	+3
Family Childcare	57	37	6	40	48	12	-17	+11	+6
Head Start	45	47	9	43	47	9	-2	0	0
Non-public Nursery	74	25	1	55	39	6	-19	+14	+5
Prekindergarten	57	38	5	47	46	7	-10	+8	+2
Home/Informal Care	46	43	11	35	49	16	-11	+6	+5

Key: Full=Full Readiness; App=Approaching Readiness; Dev=Developing Readiness

Table 3 represents the school readiness skills for low-income children based on the type of early childhood care before kindergarten compared to the composite scores for all kindergarteners. The scores for low-income students were significantly lower across all prior early care experiences, except Head Start. Also the range among the six types of prior care is less pronounced among low-income children (35 to 55 percent) than all kindergarteners (45 to 74 percent) (Maryland State Dept. of Education, 2004).

The results of the Early Childhood Study at Georgia State University (Henry *et al.*, 2003) also provide similar findings with regard to low-income children. Four year olds in Georgia had preschool experience that varied widely in terms of quality. Teachers in Georgia Pre-K program classes had significantly higher levels of education than Head Start (a program that serves the child development needs of preschool children, birth through age five, and their low-income families) or private preschool teachers. Pre-K children from high poverty households were matched with the Head Start sample to better understand the impacts of Georgia’s Pre-K Program on economically disadvantaged children. The following figure makes the comparison

between all preschoolers and those preschoolers from economically disadvantaged Head Start and Pre-K on a test of letter and word recognition (Henry et al., 2003).

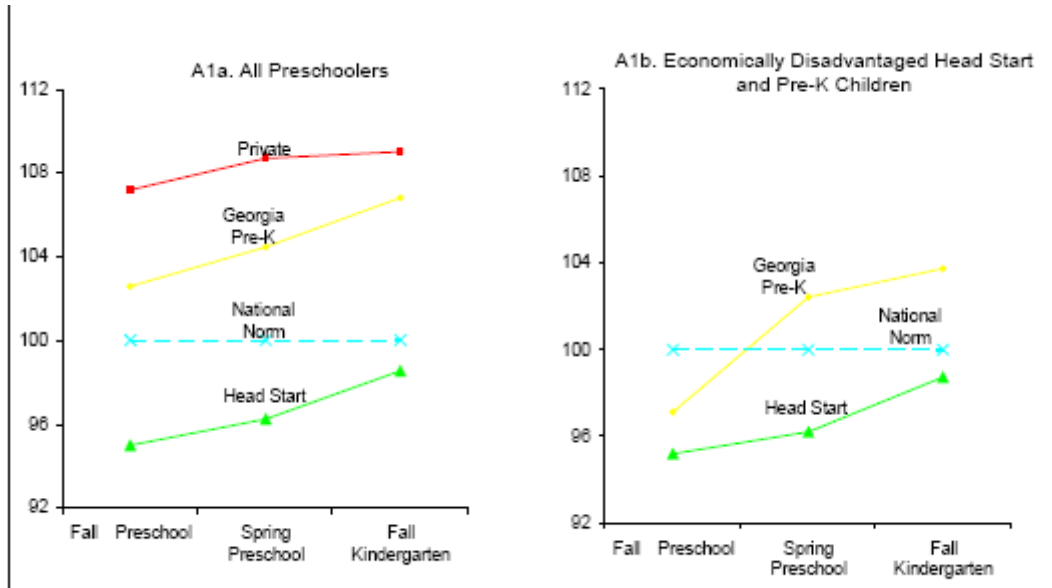


Figure 5 - Letter and Word Recognition for Children in Georgia Pre-K, Private Preschools, and Head Start

As demonstrated in Figure 5, after accounting for family and individual characteristics, children from Georgia’s Pre-K Program were significantly better prepared for kindergarten than children enrolled in Head Start based on letter and word recognition skills.

According to the Maryland school readiness database, a total of 1,316 students (2.5%) repeated kindergarten in school year 2003-04. The results of this analysis indicate that children from minority groups and those from low-income families are more likely to be retained than their peers. These analyses demonstrate the impact of the type of early childhood care on school readiness. The student outcomes indicate that the type of early care and education programs before kindergarten have significant impact on school readiness.

The National Education Goals Panel developed a broad definition of a child's readiness for school that includes five dimensions to measure progress of Goal #1 (S. L. E. Kagan, 1995):

- Physical well-being and motor development: general health and growth; gross and fine motor skills; and the absence of unattended physical conditions or exposure to toxic substances;
- Social and emotional development: ability to interact socially, take turns, and cooperate; positive sense of worth and ability; and the ability to interpret and express feelings;
- Language development: verbal language, including listening, speaking, and vocabulary; emerging literacy, including print awareness (assigning sounds to letter combinations), story sense (recognizing story elements), and writing process (representing ideas through drawing, letter-like shapes, or letters);
- Approaches to learning: enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence in completing tasks;
- Cognition and general knowledge: understanding of shapes and spatial relationships; knowledge of social conventions such as holidays; and knowledge derived from looking across objects, events, or people for similarities, differences, and associations.

These five dimensions all affect the future success of children, and the development of each should be supported in both the pre-school years and when a child starts school (Bruner et al., 2005).

A ready schools model is one that builds a comprehensive and coordinated system to deliver supports and services to children and families efficiently and effectively. The NGA (National Governors' Association) Task Force on School Readiness has established some recommendations and policy options to promote ready schools, ready states, ready communities, ready families, and ready children. This Task Force identifies the collaboration of stakeholders

who share a belief system that supports equal access to high quality early childhood education for all children through the following recommendations (NGA, 2005). These recommendations envelope the concepts of the ready schools that reach out, reach back, and reach with intensity.

Reaching out

- 1) Develop a vision and strategic plan for school readiness that considers the role of families, schools, and communities and that addresses the developmental needs of children beginning before birth to kindergarten and beyond.
 - a) Use vision to set specific goals for promoting school readiness and develop a strategic plan to achieve them;
 - b) Seek regular input from state and local stakeholders from the public and private sectors on the vision, priorities, and policy recommendations to ensure a comprehensive approach and strong buy-in;
 - c) Periodically revisit the comprehensive statewide plan to evaluate progress and realign goals and priorities over time;
 - d) Partner with public and private stakeholders to develop a strategic plan for raising awareness and building public and political will for school readiness among parents, voters, policymakers, and business and community leaders.
- 2) Build a comprehensive and coordinated statewide system for school readiness.
 - a) Create a consolidated agency for early childhood and/or establish a governance structure that promotes collaboration and establishes clear lines of authority over priorities and policy decisions (e.g., a children's cabinet, an interdepartmental council for school readiness, or a public-private commission);

- b) Establish mechanisms to require all agencies that administer programs and services for children to collaborate on policy decisions and coordinate services (e.g., formal memoranda of understanding or joint administrative authority over funding);
 - c) Implement unified data collection requirements, training opportunities, and professional standards across prekindergarten, childcare, and Head Start programs;
 - d) Provide new funding and leverage existing resources for system coordination efforts.
- 3) Ensure accountability for results across agencies and between the state and local levels.
- a) Establish goals and measure progress toward outcomes for children, families, schools, communities, and state systems;
 - b) Establish common measurements and consistent data reporting mechanisms to enable information sharing and programs between the state and local levels;
 - c) Develop a communications strategy to report progress and build support for school readiness efforts among parents, educators, legislators, policymakers, and the public;
 - d) Use results to revisit the school readiness plan, evaluate progress, and realign goals, resources, and priorities over time.

Reaching back

- 1) Support parents in their primary role as their children's first teachers.
 - a) Provide easy access to information on parenting, child development, and available services through Web sites, information kits, parent resource guides, and community-based programs (e.g., libraries, recreation centers, and family resource centers);
 - b) Engage pediatricians, family practitioners, and other health care providers in identifying children with developmental delays (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional), referring children for assistance, and providing information to parents on child development;

- c) Conduct information and outreach campaigns to build public will and inform parents about child development through, for example, public service announcements and public and private media outlets;
- d) Provide support services to families through income support, prenatal care, childcare, home visits, family literacy, and parent-child education programs and reach out to at risk and socially isolated families;
- e) Promote public and private sector strategies to increase parents' flexibility in balancing work and family needs (e.g., adopt paid family leave and/or child tax credits for individuals and employers; adopt family-friendly policies, such as flex-time, telecommuting, and childcare assistance for state employees; and encourage and publicly recognize private sector employers for doing the same).

2) Promote safe, stable, and economically secure families.

- a) Establish school readiness as a goal of housing, workforce, family health, and economic support systems, and include these systems in statewide school readiness planning;
- b) Promote asset development and savings among working families (e.g., individual development accounts, asset disregards for public cash assistance, home ownership promotions programs, and antipredatory lending legislation);
- c) Offer mental health services, counseling, and prevention services for substance abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect to at risk parents and foster parents.

3) Address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

- a) Provide information and resources to families in their home language as well as in English;
- b) Expand access to English language training and resources for parents;

- c) Recruit teachers, caseworkers, service providers, and policy leaders from diverse backgrounds;
 - d) Train providers and early childhood educators on language development, second-language acquisition, and culturally responsive teaching methods.
- 4) Ensure that all young children from birth to age five have access to high quality care and learning opportunities at home and in other settings.
- a) Develop innovative strategies to raise the quality and quantity of licensed early care and education options for families;
 - b) Support a high quality early care and education workforce.
- 5) Support schools, families, and communities in facilitating the transition of young children into the kindergarten environment.
- a) Establish school readiness as a goal among state and local K-12 leadership, invite K-12 leadership to the state school readiness planning tables, and/or include early childhood representatives in state and local councils;
 - b) Provide guidance, resources, and technical assistance to school and communities in developing local transition plans among schools, families, childcare providers, early childhood educators, and other community stakeholders;
 - c) Offer supports and incentives to administrators and teachers for committing time and resources to transition activities;
 - d) Support local innovation and research into effective transition practices.

Reach with intensity

- 1) Align state early learning standards with K-3 standards.
 - a) With input from the early childhood and K-12 community, develop research-based early learning standards that are developmentally appropriate and that set clear expectations for what young children should know and be able to do before, during, and after school entry;
 - b) Use the early learning standards to guide early education curriculum and assessments to ensure that what is being taught and measured matches expectations;
 - c) Solidify partnerships with higher education institutions to ensure that early childhood and elementary educator preparation tracks incorporate early learning standards and child development into their curriculum.
- 2) Promote local collaboration and needs assessments for school readiness.
 - a) Provide guidance and resources to help community leaders and all related stakeholders (e.g., family support, early childhood education, health and mental health, and other services) to collaboratively assess needs, prioritize investments, and streamline service delivery systems to meet local school readiness needs;
 - b) Offer flexible funding to support local school readiness priorities in exchange for measurable results.
- 3) Assist community leaders in tracking school readiness outcomes.
 - a) Provide support to communities in setting measurable goals for child outcomes, selecting indicators and measures of progress, evaluating results, and communicating outcomes;
 - b) Compile results across communities to measure statewide trends and conditions and to communicate them so as to raise awareness and build support for school readiness efforts.

- 4) Seek community input in statewide planning efforts.
 - a) Include community representatives at the state school readiness planning tables, or form an advisory board of local leaders and stakeholders to form state decisions;
 - b) Hold town hall meetings, local public forums, or focus groups with community stakeholders to seek their input on statewide planning efforts.
- 5) Provide comprehensive services for infants and toddlers.
 - a) Use flexible funding sources to expand voluntary, comprehensive, high quality birth to age three initiatives, home visiting programs, and parent education programs;
 - b) Offer incentives for providers to increase high quality childcare services for children from birth to age three;
 - c) Raise standards for infant and toddler licensing;
 - d) Offer professional development opportunities for all early care and education providers on infant and toddler development, and consider offering financial support and incentives for such training;
 - e) Develop a statewide network of infant and toddler specialists to provide training and on-site mentoring to infant and toddler providers.
- 6) Expand high quality, voluntary prekindergarten opportunities for three and four year olds.
 - a) Use flexible funding sources to support prekindergarten programs, create a dedicated funding stream, encourage local school districts to use Title I funds for prekindergarten programs, leverage local and private sector resources, or consider sliding parent fees or sliding scale tuition rates;
 - b) Set high standards for quality components, such as classroom size and child staff ratios, teacher qualifications and training, and curriculum linkages to K-12 learning standards;

- c) Leverage existing capacity among school districts, childcare providers, Head Start programs, and others to provide greater access to prekindergarten programs;
 - d) Provide resources and guidance to prekindergarten educators on creating literacy-rich environments.
- 7) Address the school readiness needs of children in foster care and children with special needs.
- a) Increase collaboration among health, foster care, child mental health, early intervention services, and early care and education programs to increase identification and referrals to necessary services and ensure the needs of all children are met;
 - b) Improve integrated service delivery among systems.

Achieving school readiness cannot be accomplished by any single agency or individual (NGA, 2005). It requires public and private partnerships, communities, schools, families, agencies, and policymakers working together to provide access to high quality early childhood education for all children.

WHAT IS QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD AND WHY IS IT SO CRITICAL?

Quality in early childhood education and care has many dimensions. Children construct knowledge actively, integrating new concepts and ideas into their existing understandings (Bowman et al., 2000). Educators have both an opportunity and an obligation to provide environments that facilitate and encourage learning to prepare children to be lifelong learners. Children enter educational settings with many different cognitive, social, physical, and motor skills. These differences are associated with both “functional” characteristics-such as

temperament, learning style, and motivation-and “status” characteristics-including gender, race, ethnicity, and social class (Bowman et al., 2000).

Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers is the product of a three-year study during which 17 experts, appointed by the National Research Council as members of the Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, reviewed studies from many fields in the behavioral and social sciences that used many different methods, both quantitative and qualitative, and both observational and experimental. They restricted their attention to those aspects of the research literature that have clear implications for what and how young children are taught. The Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers Executive Summary (Bowman et al., 2000) has identified quality programs as those that embrace the following components for effective early childhood education:

- 1) Cognitive, social-emotional (mental health), and physical development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth all requiring active attention in the preschool years.
 - a) Social skills and physical dexterity influence cognitive development, just as cognition plays a role in children’s social understanding and motor competence. All are therefore related to early learning and later academic achievement and are necessary domains of early childhood pedagogy.
- 8) Responsive interpersonal relationships with teachers nurture young children’s dispositions to learn and their emerging abilities.
 - a) Social competence and school achievement are influenced by the quality of early teacher-child relationships, and by teachers’ attentiveness to how the child approaches learning.
- 9) Both class size and adult-child ratios are correlated with greater program effects.

- a) Low adult-child ratios are associated with more extensive teacher-child interaction, more individualization, and less restrictive and controlling teacher behavior;
- b) Smaller group size has been associated with more child initiations, and more opportunities for teachers to work on extending language, mediating children's social interactions, and encouraging and supporting exploration and problem solving.

10) While no single curriculum or pedagogical approach can be identified as best, children who attend well-planned, high-quality early childhood programs in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling. Particular findings of relevance in this regard include the following:

- a) Children who have a broad base of experience in domain-specific knowledge (for example, in mathematics or an area of science) move more rapidly in acquiring more complex skills;
- b) More extensive language development—such as a rich vocabulary and listening comprehension—is related to early literacy learning;
- c) Children are better prepared for school when early childhood programs expose them to a variety of classroom structures, thought processes, and discourse patterns. This does not mean adopting methods and curriculum of the elementary school; rather it is a matter of providing children with a mix of whole group, small group, and individual interactions with teachers, the experience of discourse patterns associated with school, and such mental strategies as categorizing, memorizing, reasoning, and metacognition.

11) Young children who are living in circumstances that place them at risk of school failure—including poverty, low level of maternal education, maternal depression, and other factors

that can limit their access to opportunities and resources that enhance learning and development are much more likely to succeed in school if they attend well-planned, high-quality early childhood programs.

- a) Many children, especially those in low-income households, are served in childcare programs of such low quality that learning and development are not enhanced and may even be jeopardized;
- b) The importance of teacher responsiveness to children's differences, knowledge of children's learning processes and capabilities, and the multiple developmental goals that a quality preschool program must address simultaneously all point to the centrality of teacher education and preparation.

12) The professional development of teachers is related to the quality of early childhood programs, and program quality predicts developmental outcomes for children.

- a) Formal early childhood education and training have been linked consistently to positive caregiver behaviors;
- b) The strongest relationship is found between the number of years of education and training and the appropriateness of teacher's classroom behavior.

13) Programs found to be highly effective in the U.S. and exemplary programs abroad actively engage teachers and provide high-quality supervision.

- a) Teachers are trained and encouraged to reflect on their practice and on the responsiveness of their children to classroom activities, and to revise and plan their teaching accordingly.

Children who had the benefit of high quality early learning programs are more likely to show long term gains in measures of educational achievement, including higher reading and math scores, complete high school, attend a four year college, earn higher incomes, delay parenthood,

and are less likely to be arrested than children who have not benefited from these experiences (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). Early learning environments must be high quality to optimize a child's healthy intellectual, social, emotional, and physical growth. Good childcare promotes children's development and learning, while poor-quality childcare places children at risk (NAEYC, 1995).

Children who are at heightened risk for school failure are affected by the quality of their early learning experiences in childcare than children who are not at risk (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). The quality of full-day childcare centers and family-based childcare (provided by non-relatives and relatives in the provider's home) is minimally acceptable in most cases and, in many situations, may place the health and safety of young children, especially toddlers, at risk (Galinsky & et al., 1994). The lower quality early childhood programs have the highest enrollment of our most vulnerable children. These are the children who are at risk for school failure and are more strongly influenced by the quality of early childhood programs. In the U.S., 76% of children ages three and four receive education and care from someone other than a parent (NCES, 1999). Most attend a center-based program defined as preschool, childcare, or Head Start.

The National Institute for Early Education Research examines two approaches to measuring the quality of early childhood programs. They focus on process and structure.

Process quality emphasizes the actual experiences that occur in educational settings, such as child-teacher interactions and the types of activities in which children are engaged. They may also include health and safety provisions as well as materials available and relationships with parents. The process is measured through observation of the classroom, experiences, and rating

multiple dimensions of the program. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, ECERS, (Harms et al., 1998) has been widely used to measure quality process in early childhood education programs. It includes 43 items organized into areas of center-based care for children aged 2.5 through 5 years. These areas are: personal care routines, space and furnishings, language-reasoning, interaction, activities, program structure, and parents and staff. When the activities and interactions are rated higher, children develop more advanced language and math skills (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). Conversely, poorer process quality has been linked to increased behavior problems (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999).

Structural quality is a measure to examine the structural and teacher characteristics of the program, such as teacher-child ratios, class size, qualifications and compensation of teachers and staff, and square footage (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Structural components of a program are thought to contribute to quality in a more indirect way and are often regulated through state licensing requirements. These two sets of quality indicators are mutually inclusive in their influence of the quality educational experiences of children. The two components of ready schools, reaching out and reaching back, can be measured through these quality indicators for children, families, and teachers (Espinoza, 2002).

For Children

- To be provided an environment where they are respected, nurtured, and challenged;
- To have ongoing opportunities to learn important skills, knowledge, and dispositions;
- To be able to make meaningful decisions throughout the day;
- To have their home language and culture respected, appreciated, and incorporated into the curriculum and classroom;

- To participate in individual, small group, and large group activities;
- To learn skills necessary for future academic success;
- To have the opportunity to learn basic school readiness skills;
- To be encouraged to use their natural curiosity as a powerful motivator;
- To be given variety in their daily schedule.

For Families

- To be included as partners in all aspects of the educational program;
- To be welcomed into the program and allowed to observe and participate in activities;
- To have opportunities to improve their educational and/or parenting skills;
- To be routinely provided with information about each child's progress;
- To have opportunities to contribute to the policies and program of the preschool;
- To have their home culture and language respected, appreciated, and incorporated into all communications;
- To be viewed as having strengths and that bonds between parents and children are supported.

For Teachers, Curriculum, and Classrooms

- To have completed a four year college degree and specific training in early childhood education;
- To have frequent, meaningful interactions with children;
- To teach important concepts such as mathematics and early literacy through projects, everyday experiences, collaborative activities, and active curriculum;
- To regularly assess each child's progress and make adjustments as necessary;

- To refer children who may have special learning needs for comprehensive evaluation and diagnosis;
- To be paid a professional salary with benefits;
- To communicate respect for the families and warmth for the children;
- To have respectful, collaborative relationships with other staff, parents, and other professionals;
- To use curriculum with specified goals, approaches toward learning, expected outcomes and assessment procedures;
- To afford children the opportunity to learn in spacious, well-equipped classrooms.

The third component of the ready schools concept, reaching with intensity, concerns itself with the overall future success for children. This intensity aspect encompasses many fronts, learning standards, assessments, achievement gaps, partnerships, funding, and stakeholder collaboration.

WHY IS INTENSITY OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD SO CRITICAL?

Research has demonstrated important links between quality early childhood education programs and student learning and success. But intensity and length of participation matter. Each year hundreds of thousands of children enter kindergarten unprepared to meet the intellectual demands of school (Carnegie Corp. of New York, 1995). This is especially true for students who are at risk of later school failure due to factors such as poverty. This evidence is particularly strong with respect to school readiness for children from families of limited education and low-income (Ramey & Ramey, 2002).

During the past decade there has been a steady increase in scientific evidence that established the undeniable importance of the early years in human development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Research suggests that although brain development begins in utero and continues through adolescence, the brain undergoes its most dramatic growth in the early years of life (Nelson & Bloom, 1997). Failing to foster this development and seize upon these critical periods has been evidenced in school performance in the primary grades through the disaggregated results of subgroups. Recent policy trends have created opportunities for the nation to assume a new and influential role in school readiness through the provision of comprehensive early childhood programs and services.

The last component of the ready school concept is reaching out with intensity. The significance of maintaining this intensity and its sustainability of such services is supported by the findings in the Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go to School (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). This study, begun in 1993, was designed in part to examine the influence of typical center-based childcare on children's development during their preschool years and then subsequently as they moved into the formal elementary education system. The project has clearly demonstrated the importance of high quality preschool childcare for enhancing children's cognitive, language, and social development into the elementary school years. The overall findings are summarized below (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999):

- High quality childcare is an important element in achieving the national goal of having all children ready for school;
- High quality care continues to positively predict children's performance well into their school careers;

- Children who have been traditionally at risk of not doing well in school are affected more by the quality of childcare experiences than other children;
- The quality of childcare classroom practices was related to children's cognitive development, while the closeness of the childcare teacher-child relationship influenced social development through the early school years.

The report states that while childcare experiences are important, they are not the only determining factor in children's success. We should not hold hopes that high quality care will forever erase the major disadvantages some children face as they come to school (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). But promoting efforts to improve quality early care and education experiences will enable all children to be ready to learn and succeed in school. Based on the findings, the researchers note future strategies for improving the quality of early care. They are as follows:

Fiscal Strategies

The first phase of the study demonstrated the link between the cost of services and the quality of care received by children in typical childcare centers in the U.S. In order to raise the quality of care, attention needs to be given to the financing of childcare.

- Increased investments in childcare from both the public and private sector are needed. While progress has been made over the past decade, greater effort will be required to raise the quality to the level called for in this report;

- The quality set aside in the federal and state funds for childcare is a wise investment and should be undertaken to ensure that efforts are targeted to improving the quality of services as originally intended. The funds available for quality improvements should be expanded;
- Childcare subsidies should be redesigned to offer incentives for providing high quality care. Subsidy systems can be refigured to tie subsidy payments to higher program standards and to provide higher compensation for teachers. Such approaches to subsidy systems provide good opportunities for improving the quality of care in all states;
- Tax incentives should encourage the use of higher quality care and education. The current federal and state tax credits have ceilings so low that families purchasing high quality care get tax credits for only a fraction of the real cost of services. These incentives encourage parents to choose the lowest cost services available, which are often of lower quality as well.

Professional Preparation and Compensation Approaches

Findings of the first phase of the study suggest that the training and compensation of teachers who work in early care and education settings are important areas to target for improving quality. The research indicated that the quality of childcare was related to both the formal education levels and the specialized early childhood training of the classroom teachers. Similarly, teacher compensation was closely linked to the quality of services in childcare. These findings further underline the need to raise quality, indicating that these childcare experiences continue to influence the children's development through the early elementary years.

- Regulations at the state level should call for much higher minimum levels of training for teachers than are currently in place. Formal training is a key element for teacher preparation

and should be required such as through some form of credentialing comparable to the K-12 system;

- A major new initiative to support teacher preparation programs should be implemented, similar to the federal initiatives to improve professional preparation for teachers working with young children with disabilities. In particular, teacher preparation programs should include a greater focus on helping teachers develop skills in relationship building with young children;
- In-service training is also important in building a high quality early childhood system. The current systems of training and technical assistance available to Head Start programs and programs serving children with disabilities could be used as models for extending support services to all early childhood programs in the country;
- Teacher compensation issues are important to address so that these training initiatives will produce long-term improvements in childcare quality. Teacher salaries are so low that trained teachers leave the early childhood field in great numbers, resulting in overall lower levels of teacher qualifications and childcare quality.

System and Program Strategies

Adequate improvement in the quality of care is unlikely to occur without improvements in the entire system. Attention should be paid to the infrastructure, including the regulatory system in states, the expanded use of program accreditation, and the development of broader professional preparation opportunities.

- Recent comprehensive attempts by states to provide preschool care and education experience for children are well founded and should be greatly expanded. The results of the study support policies focusing on early childhood and education as a means of improving children's chances of being ready for school;
- Programs that are accredited by national accrediting agencies tend to have higher quality. Efforts to expand use of such accrediting could prove useful in overall efforts to raise the quality of childcare;
- In order to improve the level of education and specialized training of childcare teacher preparation called for in the previous section, improvements and expansion of the teacher preparation systems will be needed;
- States should focus on improving licensing standards as a means of raising quality. As indicated in the first phase of this study, improvement in regulation of childcare can have a positive impact on quality. Childcare policies, which keep regulations at minimum and exempt categories of providers from regulations to help expand supply, encourage the use of lower quality informal and unregulated care and are harmful to the children.

Sustaining this intensity of high quality early childhood education is not only about better cognitive and social outcomes for young children while they are in the childcare setting but moves beyond the early school years. It has future impact on overall education, economic performance, crime prevention, family relationships, and health as children move into adulthood. Several exemplary early childhood programs have not only tracked their impacts on the children and families they served, but have quantified these impacts in terms of their return on investment to the individuals served (increased earning), to society in general (reduced victimization), and to

government and the taxpayer (reduced demand for public services and increased taxes as a result of higher earnings) (Bruner, 2004b).

WHAT IS A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD INVESTMENT?

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood development programs have rarely been portrayed as economic development initiatives, but the case for such perspective is emerging through the discourse of leading economists. Investment in human capital breeds economic success not only for those being educated, but also for the overall economy (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). The need for quality early childhood care is certainly clear among many educators, but has recently caught the attention of business leaders and economic development advocates. The potential for positive returns on investments has led one Nobel Laureate economist, James Heckman, to conclude: “Invest in the very young” (Bruner, 2004b). For every dollar invested in quality early childhood education there is a return to society of much more than the original dollar invested as evidenced in the Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Study (Nores et al., 2005). Studies find that well-focused investments in early childhood development yield high public as well as private returns (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study identified 123 low-income African American children who were assessed to be at high risk of school failure. Fifty-eight (58) of them were assigned to the program group that received a high quality preschool program at ages three and four. The remaining sixty-five (65) children were assigned to another group that received no preschool

program. Project staff collected data annually on both groups from ages three through 11, at ages 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40. The missing data rate is only 6 % across all measures. The findings of the effects through age 40 on the domains of education, economic performance, crime prevention, family relationships and health, and cost benefit analysis are reported below (Schweinhart, 2003).

Education

- The program group significantly outperformed the no-program group on highest level of schooling completed (65% vs. 45% graduating from regular high school);
- More program group females graduated from regular high school (84% vs. 32%);
- The program group significantly outperformed the no-program group on various intellectual and language tests from preschool years up to age 7, on school achievement tests at ages 9, 10, and 14, and on literacy tests at ages 19 and 27;
- The program group at age 15 and 19 had better attitudes toward school than the no-program group;
- The program group parents had better attitudes toward their 15 year-old children's schooling than did the no-program group.

Economic Performance

- More of the program group than the no-program group were employed at age 40 (76% vs. 62%), which continues the trend from age 27 (69% vs. 56%);
- More program group males than no-program males were employed at age 40 (70% vs. 50%);
- The program group had higher median annual earnings than the no-program group at age 27 and 40 (\$12,000 vs. \$10,000 at age 27 and \$20,000 vs. \$15,300 at age 40);

- More program group than no-program group owned their own homes (27% vs. 5% at age 27 and 37% vs. 28% at age 40);
- More program group owned a car at age 40 than the no-program group (82% vs. 60%); more program group than the no-program group owned a second car (30% vs. 13% at age 27 and 76% vs. 50% at age 40);
- By age 40 fewer program group than the no-program group reported receiving social services at some time in their lives (71% vs. 86%).

Crime Prevention

- Fewer program group than the no-program group had lifetime arrests (36% vs. 55%);
- Fewer program group than the no-program group had arrests for violent crimes (32% vs. 48%);
- Fewer program group than the no-program group had arrests for property crimes (36% vs. 58%);
- Fewer program group than the no-program group had arrests for drug crimes (14% vs. 34%);
- Fewer program group than the no-program group had total arrests for other crimes than those listed above in adolescence (7% vs. 29%);
- Fewer program group than the no-program group were sentenced to fewer months in prison or jail by age 40 (28% vs. 52%).

Health, Family, and Children

- More program group than no-program group males raised their own children (57% vs. 30%) and had second marriages (57% vs. 30%);

- More program group than the no-program group said they were getting along very well with their families (75% vs. 64%);
- Fewer program group than the no-program group reported using sedatives, sleeping pills, or tranquilizers (17% vs. 43%), marijuana or hashish (48% vs. 71%), or heroin (5% vs. 9%).

Cost Benefit Analysis

In year 2000 dollars discounted at three percent (3%), the economic return to society of the Perry Preschool program was \$258,888 per participant on an investment of \$15,166 per participant, which is \$17.07 per dollar invested. Of that return:

- \$195,621 went to the general public-\$12.90 per dollar invested:
 - ✓ 88% from crime savings (\$171,473);
 - ✓ 4% from education savings (\$7,303);
 - ✓ 7% from increased taxes due to higher earnings (\$14,078);
 - ✓ 1% from welfare savings (\$2,768);
- \$63,267 went to each participant-\$4.17 per dollar invested;
- Preschool participants earned 14% more per person than they would have otherwise-\$156,490 more over their lifetimes in year 2000 dollars;
- Male program participants cost the public 41% less in crime costs per person, which is \$732,894 less in undiscounted year 2000 dollars over their lifetimes.

When policymakers, advocates, and program directors evaluate programs through the lens of economic returns, they can more confidently enlist support for programs, assess the relative value of different types of programmatic investments, and even redirect or invest identified

savings into program expansion (Bruner, 2004b). These costs are saved in preventing early parenthood, health system costs, incarceration costs, and other costly results of a poor quality start for children (Ramey, 1999; Reynolds et al., 2001).

The cost benefit analysis of the Perry Preschool is a first indicator of a larger discovery about early education programs: the real benefits are not from making children smarter, but from nurturing children's non-cognitive skills, giving them social, emotional, and behavioral benefits that lead to success later in life (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003). James Heckman states that the reason the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive skills is so important is because a lot of problems with children from disadvantaged homes are their values, attitudes, and motivations. The most economically efficient way to remediate the disadvantages caused by adverse family environments is to invest in children when they are young.

The No Child Left Behind Act and all the related policies which are predicated on the assumption that we succeed with an educational intervention if we improve test scores are at best misleading. The achievement test scores of the Tests of General Educational Development (GEDs) show that they are as smart as high school graduates but they don't earn anywhere near what high school graduates earn because they lack persistence and motivation. Neglected are all noncognitive abilities that are produced by healthy families, i.e. the things we used to think of as soft and fuzzy, have a real effect on behavior (Clement, 2005).

A recent study on the reasons for not completing high school reflect Heckman's thoughts on the importance of noncognitive abilities (Whelan, 2002):

- Disengagement from or shortcomings of school:

- ✓ Bored with school routine;
- ✓ School could not offer what they needed;
- Academic problems:
 - ✓ Struggled with the K-12 system;
 - ✓ Gave up and dropped out.

The benefits achieved from quality early childhood programs far exceed their costs. With this knowledge, policymakers must identify the educational investments that yield the highest public returns. Here the literature is clear: dollars invested in early childhood development yield extraordinary public returns, resulting in better working public schools, more educated workers, and less crime (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

Viewing early childhood education as a measure of economic development may be the first step in the process of planning, implementation, and evaluation of accessible high quality early childhood education programs for all children.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature has demonstrated that quality early care may positively influence a child's health, development, educational attainment and economic well-being. Quality early childhood education has the potential to:

- Help children have greater school readiness;
- Improve scores on primary grade testing;
- Reduce grade retention;

- Increase high school graduation rates;
- Increase the likelihood of attaining higher education levels;
- Increase positive employment impacts;
- Reduce crime;
- Be cost effective;
- Enhance the quality of life.

This researcher is of the belief that the children from the two housing projects, identified in the Steeltown story, may have been impacted by the lack of access to and intensity of quality early childhood programs. This lack in early childcare intervention may have been a contributing factor to the reasons that these children have done more poorly in school when compared to their counterparts. The review of the literature has suggested that without the support of nurturing environments these children are more likely not to complete high school, have limited employment opportunities, receive welfare benefits, and commit crime.

Other western nations have achieved excellent outcomes for their children by investing in early childhood, e.g., Sweden. Almost all young children in Sweden, as well as their parents, are involved in preschool programs that are guided by clear goals for children's development, clear pedagogical and curricular principles, and mandatory education and training requirements for preschool teachers and staff (*Early childhood education and care policy in Sweden: OECD country note*, 1999). "We need to understand that childhood is a unique time of life, precious unto itself. We need to understand that nourishing it fully is not inimical, but supportive of society's best interests. As this great nation preoccupies itself with visions of the 21st century and beyond, the U.S. could make no better contribution to its own destiny than to genuinely examine

its social construction of early childhood and to reconsider society's obligation to its children” (S. L. Kagan, 2001).

This researcher plans to examine the early childhood experiences of some of the students identified in the Steeltown story. This proposed detailed study will be done to identify the reasons why parents are not attracted to quality early childhood programs that give children the opportunities that may be available to improve their school readiness skills. Identifying the reasons for not accessing quality early childhood programs within this area may offer some insight into the parents' beliefs and understanding of the social construction of early childhood. It may direct the future direction of the area's early childhood providers. It has the potential to identify a rationale for investment in early childhood programs as a strategy for future public education and economic development in the region. It may identify the importance of moving beyond the usual suspects (stakeholders) when enlisting both individual champions and groups of allies in investing in school readiness (Bruner, 2004a), and enable these stakeholders to begin to define the task, process, and resources to assure the availability of quality early childhood programs for all children in the area. In so doing, embedding the value of quality early childhood programs in the area's core belief system and the potential to offer all the prekindergarten children in the SASD area a place as described in the sentiments of a young child in the Swedish “Bracelet” Preschool (S. L. Kagan, 2001):

Here, I am never afraid.
Here, I am accepted and liked.
Here, I know what I'm allowed to do and what I'm not allowed to do and why these limits exist.
Here, others listen to me.
Here, I meet tolerance and understanding and I am helped with the things I find difficult.
Here, they see what I am good at and tell me.
Here, I may try new ideas and make my own choice.
Here, I can sense that what I think, feel, and wish is of importance.
Here, I feel that I am accepted and that I am somebody.

The renewed interest in early childhood on child health and development, educational attainment, and economic well-being has been motivated by research findings that the great majority of physical brain development occurs before the age of three. These findings have been interpreted to suggest that early childhood furnishes a window of opportunity for enriching input and a window of vulnerability to such social stressors as poverty and dysfunctional home environments (Karloly *et al.*, 1999). It was the goal of this researcher to begin to identify how and why these windows have been opened, closed, or shattered in the lives of some of the children in the Steeltown community.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

Preparing all children to begin school ready to learn is imperative to their future success. Stimulating and enriching learning environments encourage children to be fully engaged in the world around them. This engagement enhances their future growth and learning. Restrictive or punitive environments cause infants to withdraw and limit their potential growth and development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is extremely unlikely that children who start school behind their peers ever catch up. Children who enter kindergarten with limited language development are more likely to develop reading problems. The study of the Abbott Preschool Program on measure of language and literacy skills demonstrated a statistically significant effect of preschool attendance on average receptive language scores as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT) (Lamy Esposito *et al.*, 2004-05).

The review of the literature suggests that quality early childhood programs furnish a window of opportunity for enriching input and a window of vulnerability to such social stressors as poverty and dysfunctional home environments (Karloly *et al.*, 1999). School readiness is to include both children's academic and social skills as they enter school and "ready schools," meaning the school's preparedness to serve all children (Early, 2004). This ready schools concept focuses on young children's school transitions. But the key ingredients to a successful transition are the activities and events (over and above preschool and school programs) that are designed to overcome the discontinuities that may disrupt children's learning and development (Love *et al.*, 1992).

The data from the Children Entering School Ready to Learn School Readiness Information Report (Maryland State Dept. of Education, 2004) compares the composite scores for all kindergarteners and those from low-income students. The findings conclude that the school readiness scores of the low-income students were significantly lower across all prior care experiences, except Head Start.

This researcher is of the belief that some of the children from the two housing projects identified in the Steeltown story may have been impacted by either their participation in or lack of participation in quality early childhood programs. Participation or nonparticipation in quality early childhood programs may have been a contributing factor to the differences in student achievement as evidenced on the PSSA results of the two intermediate schools in the SASD. This researcher examined the early childhood experiences of some of the students from the Steeltown community who reside in either of the two subsidized housing projects and their immediate surrounding neighborhoods. This study was done to identify the reasons parents choose to enroll or not enroll their children in quality early childhood programs. Identifying these reasons may offer insight into the parents' beliefs and understanding of the social construction of early childhood. It may provide future direction of the area's early childhood providers. It also has the potential to identify a rationale for investment in early childhood programs as a strategy for future public education and economic development in the region. It may begin to change the current belief system to value quality early childhood education and view it for its long term positive return on economic and societal investment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Given the presence of early childhood programs in a community, what are the reasons that parents/primary caregivers choose to have their children participate or not participate in these programs.

Research Questions

Table 4 – Organizational Framework

Questions	Methodology	Source	Connection to Conceptual Framework
1. What are the early childhood programs available in the area?	Examine SASD data on early childhood programs in the community Facilitate Focus Groups	Existing Data SASD (Title I Parent Involvement Coordinator) Parents/Primary caregivers	Knowledge of early childhood programs
2. What do these programs provide? academics, socialization, childcare, other	Examine SASD data on early childhood programs in the community Facilitate Focus Groups	Existing Data SASD (Title I Parent Involvement Coordinator) Parents/Primary caregivers	Knowledge of early childhood programs
3. What type of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?	Examine SASD data on early childhood programs in the community Facilitate Focus Groups Conduct Interviews	Existing Data SASD (Title I Parent Involvement Coordinator) Parents/Primary caregivers	Knowledge of early childhood programs Basis for the type of early childhood care selected by parents/primary caregivers and the level of school readiness based on the selection
4. On what basis is this type of early childhood care chosen by parents/primary caregivers?	Conduct Interviews	Parents/Primary caregivers	Basis for the type of early childhood care selected by parents/primary caregivers and the level of school readiness based on the selection
5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?	Conduct Interviews	Parents/Primary caregivers	Basis for the type of early childhood care selected by parents/primary caregivers and the level of school readiness based on the selection
6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?	Facilitate Focus Groups Conduct Interviews	Parents/Primary caregivers	Unanticipated Outcomes

Table 4 represents the organizational framework for the research questions.

METHODOLOGY

Given the presence of early childhood programs in the community and the importance of quality early childhood education on a child's future academic success as supported in the literature, the goal of this study was to include an examination of the reasons parents/primary caregivers choose to have their preschool age children participate or not participate in quality early childhood education programs. This study provides descriptions of the early childhood programs in the community and, given the importance of early childhood programs on future academic success, examines the dilemma of why parents/primary caregivers choose to have their children participate or not participate in these programs. The design of this study followed the exploratory case study methodology. Focus groups, interviews, and existing information gathered by school district personnel have been utilized as sources of evidence. This researcher used the following procedure in designing the focus groups and interviews.

Planning and Purpose: develop and articulate a clear focus

Questioning Strategy: generating questions that set participants at ease and establishes a non-threatening environment

Facilitator (in this case the researcher): knowledgeable regarding group procedures, processes, and content

Participants: *Focus Group and Interview Participants* selected using the convenience sampling technique (based on availability and appropriateness) to consist of seven to twelve participants who share some characteristic with the focus issue

Methodology: Prepare questions; be prepared for participants' questions concerning the context and content of the focus group and interview; contact participants to confirm date and time; room environment clean and comfortable; arrange seating to maximize group interaction and one on one interview; and facilitate discussion

End of Session Analysis: an analysis should be conducted immediately following the sessions noting particular interactions, trends or patterns, and content and context of discussion

In exploratory case studies, pilot studies are useful in determining the final protocols that will be used. The following protocol will be used to design the pilot study for the focus groups and the research project to include focus groups and interviews (Yin, 1994).

Table 5 – Organizational Protocol

Organization	Pilot Study	Research Project
<p>Overview of the project (project objectives and case study issues)</p>	<p>This study is designed to examine the reasons parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children choose to have their children participate or not participate in quality early childhood programs.</p>	<p>This study is designed to examine the reasons parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children choose to have their children participate or not participate in quality early childhood programs.</p>
<p>Field procedures (credentials and access to sites and sources)</p>	<p>This study is being conducted by a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh. The pilot focus group session will be held in a local elementary school. The members of the focus group have been specifically selected based on their willingness to participate in this pilot study. The members are aware that they will help establish the protocol for the questions and direction of the research project focus groups.</p>	<p>This study is being conducted by a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh at a local elementary school. The focus group sessions will be held at the recreational centers of two of the housing projects of the Steeltown community. A flyer describing the research project has been posted on the bulletin boards at the recreational centers of the two housing projects. Parents/Primary caregivers are asked to contact the after school coordinators for more information. The after school coordinators at each of the centers have agreed to act as liaison between the prospective members of the focus group and researcher. Those parents/primary caregivers interested in learning more about the research project will then be asked to submit their names and addresses so that the researcher can contact them through the mail. The mailing will contain a letter describing the research project and a consent form. The researcher will gather SASD information on existing early childhood programs in the area. The SASD, through office of the Title I Parent Coordinator, has collected data on existing early childhood programs in the community.</p>
<p>Questions (specific questions that the investigator must keep in mind during data collection; examine and identify the analogous information/perceptions and discontinuities between the existing information and parents' awareness of early childhood programs in the community; who and how to validate what is stated in the focus groups and interviews)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the early childhood programs available in the area? 2. What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, other? 3. What type of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school, other? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the early childhood programs available in the area? 2. What do these programs provide? Academics, socialization, childcare, other? 3. What type of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home, babysitter, daycare, nursery school? 4. On what basis is this type of early childhood care chosen by parents/primary caregivers? 5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness? 6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?

Organization	Pilot Study	Research Project
<p>Guide for the report (outline, format for the narrative which demonstrates the results of the data/information on early childhood programs in the community gathered from the focus groups, interviews, and SASD and identify, compare, and contrast the analogous information/ perceptions and discontinuities between the existing information and parents' awareness)</p>	<p>The pilot study focus group is being implemented to help set the guidelines of the research project focus group. The data collected during the pilot study will not be utilized in the research project.</p>	<p><u>Knowledge of early childhood programs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Question 1: Early childhood programs ▪ Question 2: Purpose for early childhood: academics, socialization, childcare ▪ Question 3: Primary type of early childhood program prekindergarten age children enrolled <p><u>Basis for the type of early childhood care selected by parents/primary caregivers and the level of school readiness based on the selection</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Question 3: Primary type of early childhood program prekindergarten age children enrolled ▪ Question 4: Basis for selection of type of childhood care ▪ Question 5: School readiness <p><u>Unanticipated Outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Question 6: Comments/questions that arise during the focus groups and/or interviews

Table 5 represents the organizational protocol of the research study. The following figure represents a graphic display of this organizational protocol. This graphic organizer will be used in Chapter 3 in the presentation of the data.

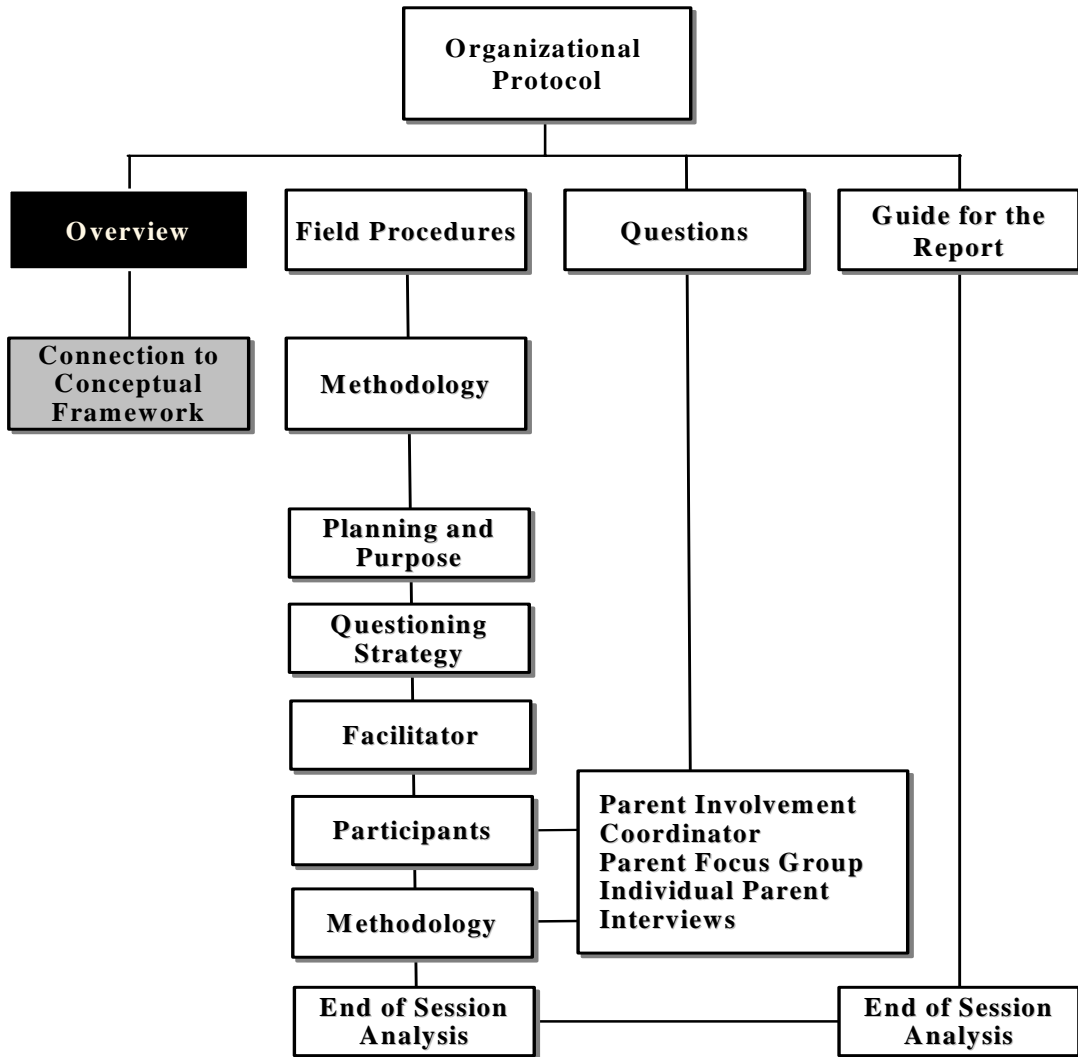


Figure 6 - Organizational Protocol

Figure 6 graphically represents the organizational protocol of the research study. Each segment of the display will be highlighted as the data is presented in Chapter 3.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

The definitions of terms below are for the purpose of this study.

Academic achievement – a measure of an individual’s knowledge in a given area or subject

Achievement gap- the gap in standardized test scores between African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and low-income students and their white, Asian, and economically advantaged peers.

At risk students- A term applied to students who have not been adequately served by social service or educational systems and who are at risk of educational failure due to lack of services, negative life events, or physical or mental challenges, among others.

Economically disadvantaged students- Students who are from low-income families and are eligible for free or reduced lunch through the federal lunch program.

Equity- The state of educational impartiality and fairness in which all children—minorities and nonminorities, males and females, successful students and those who fall behind, students with special needs and students who have been denied access in the past—receive a high-quality education and have equal access to the services they need in order to benefit from that education.

Quality early childhood education programs- Programs that follow the ready schools model: reaching out, reaching back, reaching with intensity; that are child centered: focusing on the whole child, family friendly: involvement of parents and families in the child’s overall well being, providing environments that facilitate and encourage learning to prepare children to be life long learners.

Ready Schools-Schools that have contact between kindergartens and preschools, between schools and homes, connections between schools and community resources (transition process).

School readiness- The basic background and knowledge that children are usually expected to have upon entering kindergarten both in cognitive skills (math and language), and non-cognitive skills (social and emotional). Terms to describe indicators for kindergarten school readiness are full: full readiness, approaching: approaching readiness, and developing: developing readiness.

DELIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study was conducted in and around the two housing projects within the context of the Steeltown community. The context of the research study was to provide an understanding of the reasons parents/primary caregivers choose to have their children participate or not participate in early childhood education programs in the community.

CHAPTER 3

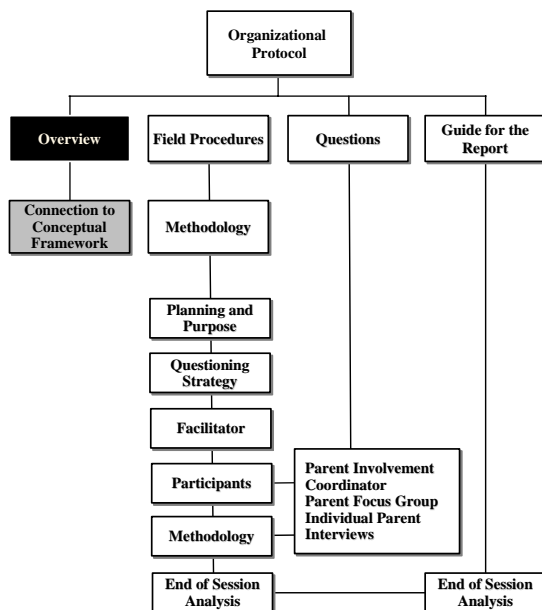
PRESENTATION OF DATA, SUMMARY OF THE STUDY, ANALYSIS OF THE DATA, AND FINDINGS BASED ON THE UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Overview

Using the Organizational Protocol in Figure 6, the researcher will present the data collected, summarize the study, examine the interactions that evolved through the analysis of the data and report the findings as a result of the unanticipated outcomes. The graphic organizer depicted in Figure 6 will guide the reader through the presentation of the data.

Connection to Conceptual Framework



The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children residing in and around the two housing projects of the Steeltown community choose to have their children participate or not participate in quality early childhood education programs available in the community. This chapter presents a descriptive interpretation of the data assembled during the research study.

The research questions are addressed under the three broader categories described in Chapter 2 in the connection to the conceptual framework and the guide for the report in the protocol design.

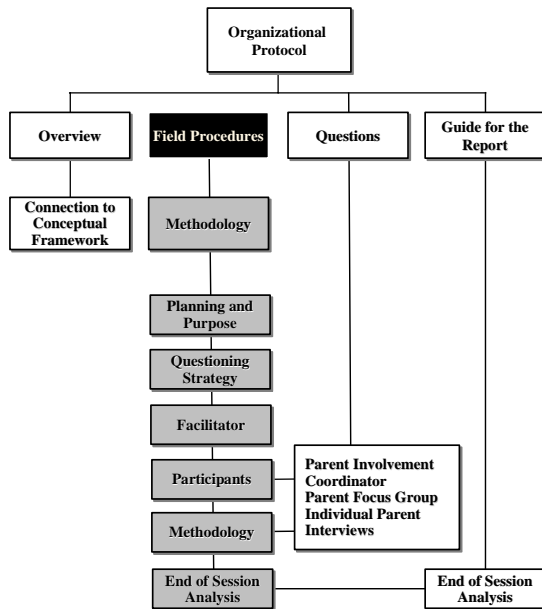
These categories are:

- knowledge of early childhood programs
 - ✓ early childhood programs
 - ✓ purpose for early childhood education programs
 - ✓ primary type of early childhood program prekindergarten children are/were enrolled
- basis for the type of early childhood care selected by parents/primary caregivers and the level of school readiness based on the selection
 - ✓ primary type of early childhood program prekindergarten children are/were enrolled
 - ✓ basis for selection of type of early childhood care
 - ✓ school readiness
- unanticipated outcomes
 - ✓ comments/questions that arise during the focus groups and/or interviews

The researcher has documented and reviewed the results of the data collected from parents/primary caregivers and the school district parent involvement coordinator through interviews and focus groups in the Steeltown community. The results of the data/information from the above mentioned sources have been used to compare and contrast the analogous information/perceptions and discontinuities between the existing information and the parents' awareness of early childhood education programs in the community. The researcher has used the following procedure, as described in Chapter 2, in designing the focus groups and interviews.

Field Procedures

Methodology



Planning and Purpose: develop and articulate a clear focus

The researcher articulated the focus of the study to each participant (parents/primary caregivers and school district parent involvement coordinator).

Given the presence of early childhood programs in a community, what are the reasons that parents/primary caregivers choose to have their children participate or not participate in these programs.

Questioning Strategy: generating questions that set participants at ease and establishing a non-threatening environment

The research questions were at times modified to address the specific individual/group of research participants. Subquestions under some of the research questions were also developed to address the specific individual/group of research participants.

The environment for the sessions was warm, inviting, and of a non-threatening nature.

Facilitator (in this case the researcher): knowledgeable regarding group procedures, processes, and content.

The research questions were not always asked in the order presented in Chapter 2. The flow of the conversations, generated through the interviews and focus groups, determined the order of the research questions.

Participants: *Focus Group and Interview Participants* selected using the convenience sampling technique (based on availability and appropriateness) to consist of one district personnel parent involvement coordinator, eight parents/primary caregivers in the pilot study focus group, fourteen individual parent/primary caregiver interviews, and a total of eleven parents/primary caregiver participants in the focus groups. All the research participants share some characteristic with the focus issue. Focus Group 1 consisted of six parents/primary caregivers and Focus Group 2 consisted of five parents/primary caregivers. The questions and detailed responses of the interview with the Parent Involvement Coordinator, the eight parents in the pilot study focus group, the eleven parents/primary caregivers in the focus groups, and the fourteen individual parent interviews are documented.

Parent Involvement Coordinator

The SASD Parent Involvement Coordinator organizes and facilitates school, community, and parent involvement primarily with the early childhood education programs within the Steeltown community.

Focus Group and Interview Participants

The parents/primary caregivers who participated in this research study are parents/primary caregivers of children, preschool age and school age, residing in and around the two subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community. Each responded to either the flyer posted in the two housing projects' recreational facilities or through personal contact invitation.

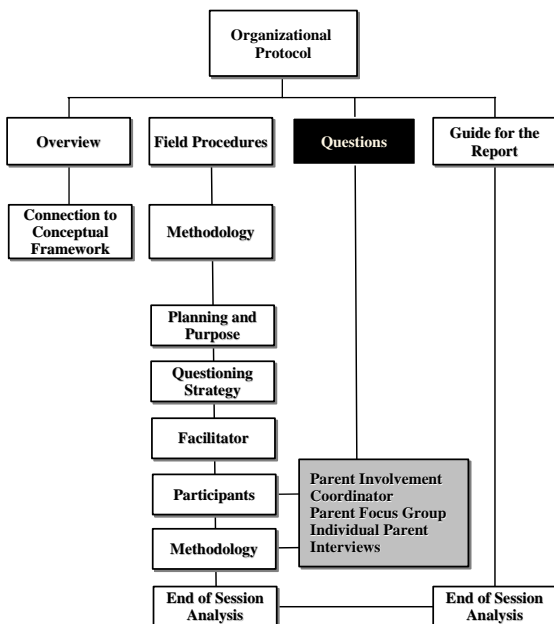
Pilot Study Focus Group Participants

The responses of the pilot study focus group were not used as data in the research study. The purpose of the pilot study was for the researcher to conduct a focus group prior to the research study, and gain insight into the process of conducting a focus group.

Methodology: Prepare questions; be prepared for participants’ questions concerning the context and content of the focus group and interviews; contact participants to confirm date and time; have the room environment clean and comfortable; arrange seating to maximize group interaction, one on one interviews, and facilitate discussion.

Each participant in the interview and focus groups responded to specific questions as identified in the Organizational Protocol Table described in Chapter 2. Some of the research questions were expanded to include subquestions based on the nature of the initial research questions.

Questions



Research Question 1: What are the early childhood programs in the area?

Research Question 2: What do these programs provide?

Research Question 3: What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?

Research Question 4: On what basis is this type of early childhood care chosen by parents/primary caregivers?

Research Question 5: How important is a child’s prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) on kindergarten school readiness?

Research Question 6: What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?

Table 6 – Research Questions for Participants

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parent Involvement Coordinator	X	X	X			X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Focus Groups	X	X	X	X	X	X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Interviews			X	X	X	X

Table 6 displays the numbers of the six research questions and the group of participants to which each question was posed. This representation graphically displays the questions as described in the organizational protocol in Chapter 2.

Questions for Parent Involvement Coordinator

1. What are the early childhood programs available in the Steeltown area?
2. What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, other?

- 2a (i). Is there any way to identify the numbers of three and four year old children in our community?
3. What types of early childhood care (ECC), primarily, do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?
- 3a. What types of early childhood programs have the current kindergarteners in the SASD participated?
6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?

Questions for Parents/Primary Caregivers in Focus Groups

The researcher asked parents/primary caregivers whether or not they had ever enrolled their children in any preschool education programs in the past or present. The answers given generated the pathways that guided the questions.

1. What are the early childhood programs available in the Steeltown area?
 - 1a. How did you learn about the early childhood programs in the area?
2. What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, other?
 - 2a. What were your specific expectations with regards to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?
 - 2b. What were the concerns you had about enrolling your children?

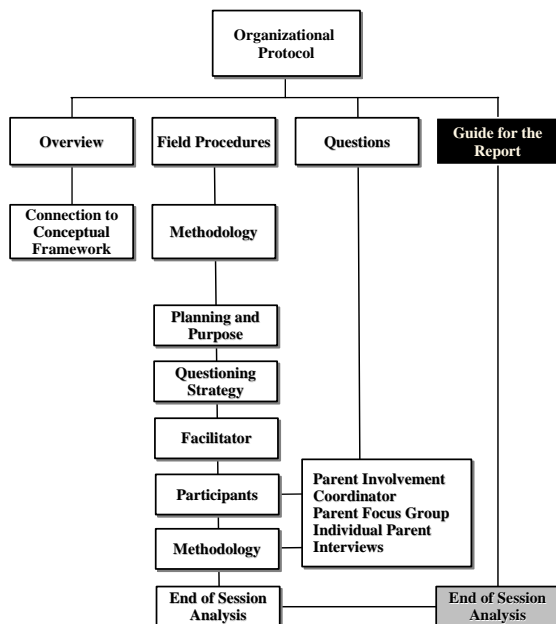
3. What type of early childhood care (ECC), primarily, have you enrolled your children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?
4. On what basis did you choose this type of early childhood care?
5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?
6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?

Questions for Individual Parents/Primary Caregivers During Interviews

3. What types of early childhood care (ECC), primarily, do parents/primary caregivers (primarily) enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?
- 3a. In what type of program has your child been enrolled?
4. On what basis did you choose this type of early childhood care?
- 4a. What are/were the reasons for your decisions?
- 4b. Did you go to preschool?
- 4c. Did you enroll any of your older children in early childhood programs?
- 4d. If yes, what were the reasons?
- 4e. If yes, but a different type of program, what were your reasons at that time?

- 4f. If yes, and the same or similar program, what were your reasons to continue?
- 4g. If no, what were your reasons?
5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0 – 5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?
- 5a. What are/were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?
- 5b. What were the reasons you selected the time frames for your child to attend?
- 5c. At what age did you enroll your child in an early childhood program?
6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community does the research participant have of the researcher?

Guide For The Report



Collection and Results of the Data

End of Session Analysis: an analysis should be conducted immediately following the sessions noting particular interactions, trends or patterns, content and context of discussion.

The researcher documented the dates, settings, participants (non-identifiable to anyone other than the researcher) and a description of each of the

interviews and focus groups in anecdotal notes and tape recordings.

The results of the data provide descriptions of the perceptions and knowledge of Steeltown community parents/primary caregivers with regard to early childhood care (ECC) and education programs. Given the importance of early childhood programs on future academic success, the researcher has examined the dilemma of why parents/primary caregivers choose to have their children participate or not participate in these programs. The design of this study followed exploratory case study methodology which included focus groups, interviews, and existing information, used as sources of evidence, gathered by school district personnel. The results of the data/information have been used to compare and contrast the analogous information, perceptions, knowledge, and discontinuities between the existing information and the parents' awareness of early childhood programs in the community.

The researcher articulated the focus of the study to each participant (parents/primary caregivers and school district parent involvement coordinator). The interviews and focus groups were conducted in various non-threatening environments. Permission to tape record most of the interviews and focus groups was granted to the researcher. The research questions were at times modified to address the specific individual or group of research participants, and also to redirect the participants as to the questions presented. The research questions were not always asked in the order presented in Chapter 2. The number identifying each question below coordinates with the research question as it is listed in the contextual framework in Chapter 2.

The flow of the conversations, generated through the interviews and focus groups, determined the order of the research questions. The focus groups and interview participants were selected using the convenience sampling technique (based on availability and appropriateness) to consist

of one school district parent involvement coordinator, one pilot study focus group consisting of eight parents, one focus group consisting of six parents/primary caregivers of current Head Start children, a second focus group consisting of five parents/primary caregivers of children who attend both housing recreation centers and/or a Head Start, and fourteen individual parent interviews. The parents/primary caregivers who participated in this research study are parents/primary caregivers of children, preschool age and school age, residing in and around the two subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community. Each responded to either the flyer posted in the two housing projects’ recreational facilities or through personal contact invitation.

Interview of the Parent Involvement Coordinator

The SASD Parent Involvement Coordinator organizes and facilitates school, community, and parent involvement primarily with the early childhood education programs within the Steeltown community. The coordinator also facilitates early childhood roundtables and transition teams within the Steeltown school district community. These teams include parents/primary caregivers, early childhood teachers, center coordinators and staff, and Steeltown kindergarten teachers and administrators.

Table 7 – Research Questions for the Parent Involvement Coordinator

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parent Involvement Coordinator	X	X	X			X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Focus Groups	X	X	X	X	X	X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Interviews			X	X	X	X

Table 7 displays the numbers of the six research questions and the group of participants to which each question was posed. This representation graphically displays the questions as described in the organizational protocol in Chapter 2. The questions posed to the parent coordinator are highlighted in Table 7.

1. What are the early childhood programs available in the Steeltown area?
2. What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, other?
- 2a(i). Is there any way to identify the numbers of 3 and 4 year old children in our community?
3. What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitters, daycare, nursery school?
- 3a. What types of early childhood programs have the current kindergarteners in the SASD participated?
6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community does the participant have of the researcher?

Responses to Questions of Steeltown Area School District Parent Involvement Coordinator

The responses of the parent coordinator are based on existing information used as sources of evidence gathered by school district personnel.

The response to each question is stated below. Some responses have been graphically displayed, when possible, along with a narrative describing the sources of evidence gathered during the interview and based on SASD information.

Research Question 1: What are the early childhood programs available in the Steeltown area?

There are 27 early childhood programs in the Steeltown area.

Research Question 2: What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, other?

These programs service children from age infancy to preschool as well as after school care. These include daycare services, babysitting services, and preschool education services. The programs provide part time to full time services and include before, during, and after school hours.

Based on the SASD 2005-06 Kindergarten Parent Survey, the following information was gathered. The parents were asked to select all the responses that applied to the reasons they chose to enroll their children in early childhood programs.

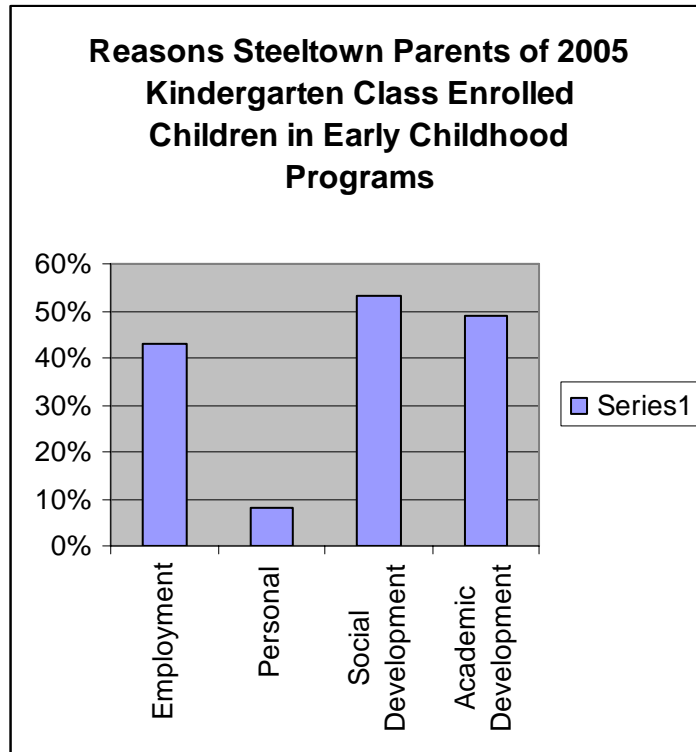


Figure 7 - Reasons for Enrollment

Figure 7 represents the 2005 kindergarten parents' responses when asked to select all the reasons that applied for enrolling their preschool age children in early childcare. The figure provides a graphic representation of the distribution of the responses. Of the 234 completed surveys, 98 parents responded for social development reasons, 90 parents responded for academic reasons, 80 parents responded for employment reasons, and 14 parents responded for personal reasons. Two parents did not respond to the question. The parents were asked to select all the responses that applied to the reasons they chose to enroll their children in early childhood programs. Therefore the percentage totals represent more than 100%.

Research Subquestion 2a(i): Is there any way to identify the numbers of 3 and 4 year old children in the Steeltown community?

Based on the SASD 2005-06 Kindergarten Parent Survey, the following information was gathered.

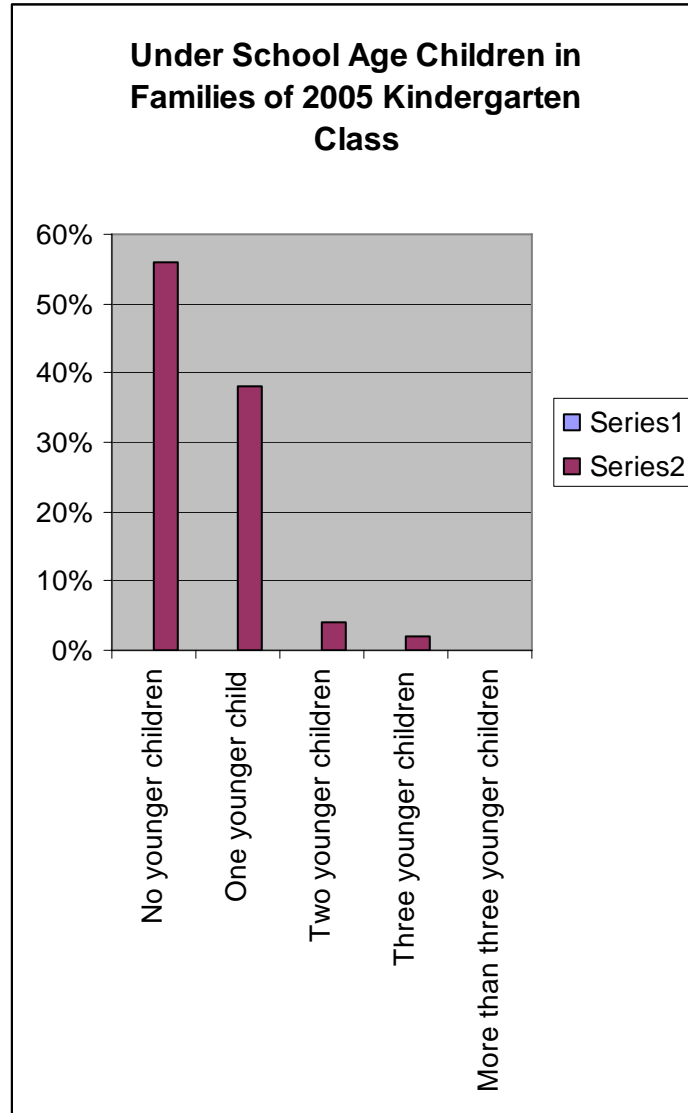


Figure 8 - Under School Age Children

Figure 8 identifies only those numbers of under school age children of the families of 2005 kindergarten children enrolled in the SASD who participated in the school district survey. Of the 231 responses to this question, 129 reported zero younger children, 87 reported one younger

child, 10 reported two younger children, four reported three younger children, and one reported more than three younger children. There were three parents who did not respond to the question.

Research Question 3: What types of early childhood care do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?

There are a variety of early childhood care (ECC) programs that offer services from infancy to 5 years of age. Many focus on working with parents and building parenting skills. The school district information regarding all Steeltown preschoolers' early childhood experiences is limited due to the difficulty in contacting all preschool parents/primary caregivers in the community.

Research Subquestion 3a: What types of early childhood programs have the current kindergarteners in the SASD participated?

Based on the SASD 2005-06 Kindergarten Parent Survey, the following information was gathered.

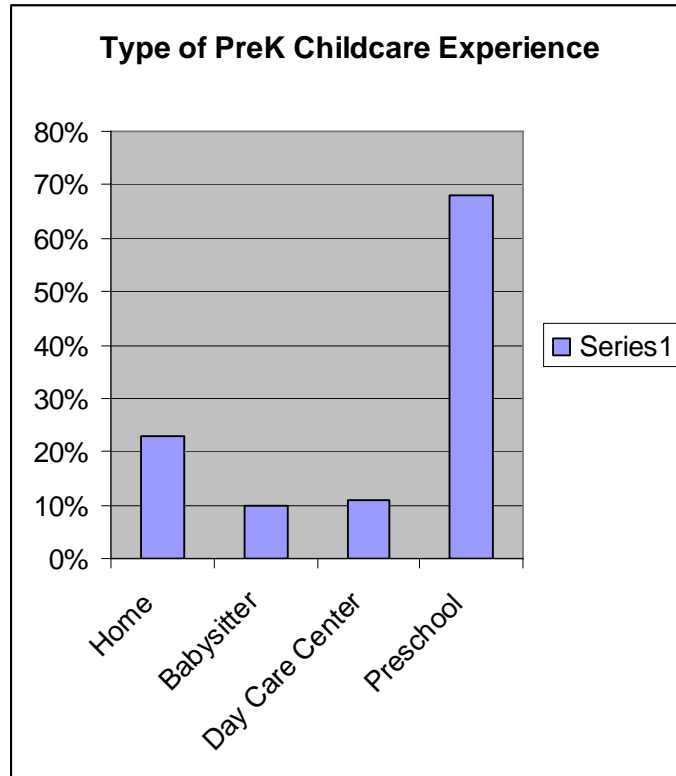


Figure 9 - Type of Pre-K Childcare Experience

Figure 9 represents the responses in the 234 completed surveys, 54 children experienced care in their own home by one of the parents and never enrolled in or experienced any other childcare on a regular basis, 23 children experienced care in their home or in the home of a relative or babysitter given by a relative or babysitter on a regular basis, 25 children were given care at a daycare center on a regular basis that provided babysitting care only with no instructional learning time, and 157 children experienced care in a preschool that provided kindergarten readiness instruction. The parents were asked to select all the responses that applied to all the types of early childhood education programs in which their children were enrolled. Therefore the percentage totals represent more than 100%.

Research Question 6: What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community does the research participant have of the researcher?

The parent coordinator indicated that she had no questions or comments for the researcher.

Parents/Primary Caregiver Focus Groups

The parents participating in the focus groups have children of preschool and school age in and around the two subsidized housing projects in and around the Steeltown community. Each parent/primary caregiver who participated responded to either the flyer posted in the recreational facilities of the housing projects or by personal contact by the researcher.

Table 8 – Research Questions for the Focus Groups

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parent Involvement Coordinator	X	X	X			X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Focus Groups	X	X	X	X	X	X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Interviews			X	X	X	X

Table 8 displays the numbers of the six research questions and the group of participants to which each question was posed. This representation graphically displays the questions as described in the organizational protocol in Chapter 2. The questions posed to the parents/primary caregivers during the focus groups are highlighted in Table 8.

1. What are the early childhood programs available in the Steeltown area?
 - 1a. How did you learn about the early childhood programs in the area?
2. What do these programs provide: academics, socialization, childcare, or other?

- 2a. What were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, other?
- 2b. What were the concerns you had about enrolling your children?
3. What types of early childhood care (ECC), primarily, do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?
4. On what basis did you choose this type of early childhood care?
5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?
6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the participants have of the researcher?

Response to Questions of Parents/Primary Caregivers Focus Groups

The responses of the participants in both focus groups have been combined for reporting purposes. Focus Group #1 participants were parents/primary caregivers whose children are registered for the upcoming school year's Head Start program located in the SASD. Focus Group #2 participants were parents/primary caregivers of children who attend both housing project recreation centers and/or a Head Start program located in the SASD. Both groups of parents/primary caregivers reside in and around the two subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community.

Research Question 1: What are the early childhood programs available in the Steeltown community?

The parents/primary caregivers in the focus groups stated that there were many early childhood programs, but only identified four by name.

Research Subquestion 1a: How did you learn about the early childhood programs in the area?

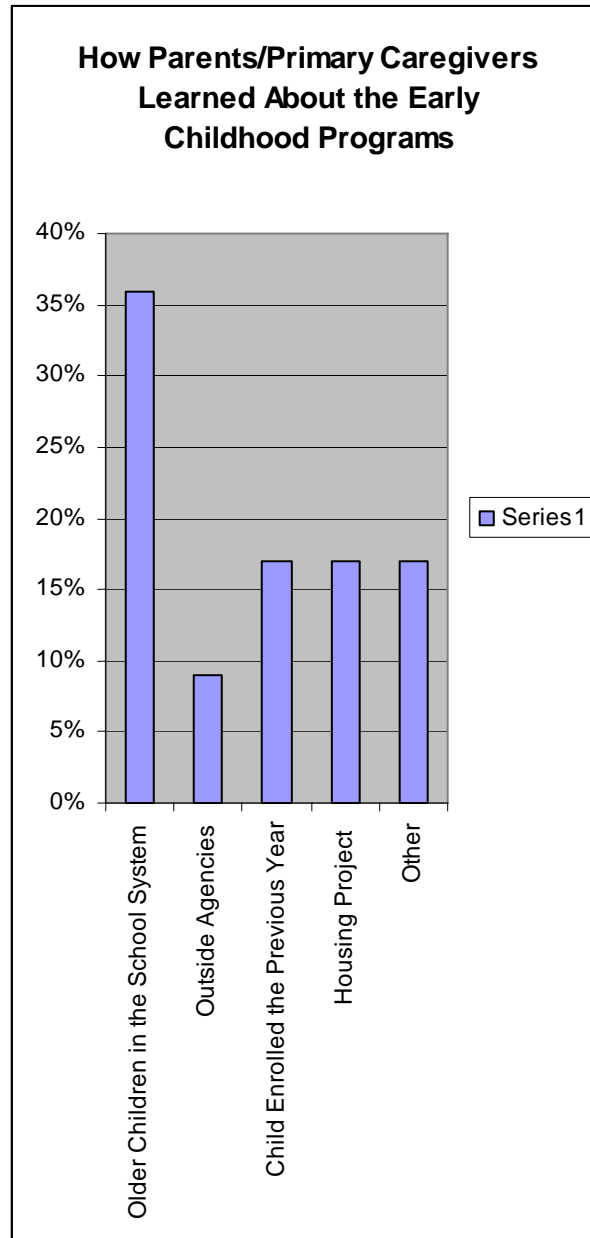


Figure 10 - How Parents Learned About Programs

Figure 10 displays the means of communication by which the parents/primary caregivers in the focus groups learned about early childhood programs in the Steeltown area. The categories listed are based on the communication vehicles by which knowledge of early childhood programs has been received by the parents/primary caregivers as reported in the focus groups. The majority of

the parents/primary caregivers reported that they learned about available early childhood programs in the area through information sent home with their older children who were enrolled in the SASD. The next best level of communication about available programs was shared by three categories: children enrolled in an early childhood program the previous year; information from their local housing authority office in the housing project; or other (word of mouth). One parent reported that she received information from another agency with which she was working.

Research Question 2: What do these programs provide?

Research Subquestion 2a: What were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?

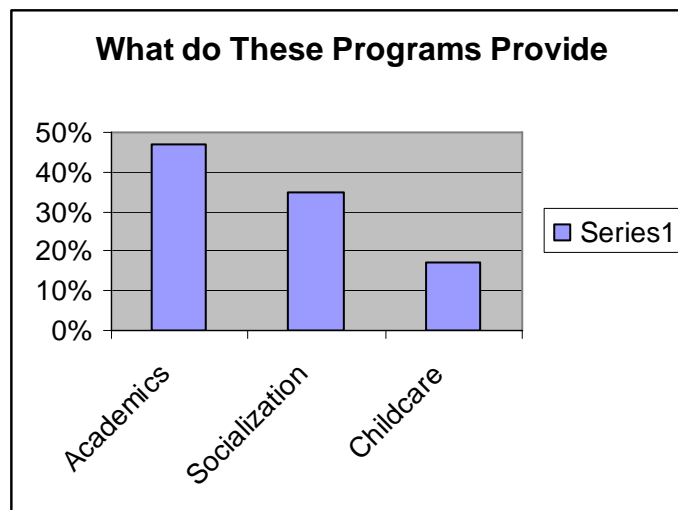


Figure 11 - What These Programs Provide

Figure 11 represents the responses to the question regarding the parents/primary caregivers' expectations of early childhood programs. Each research participant shared more than one reason for enrolling his/her child in an early childhood program. Therefore the total percentages of the

responses represent more than 100%. School readiness with regards to academics and socialization were the primary reasons for enrollment. Childcare was noted as a reason as well.

Research Question 2b: What were the concerns you had about enrolling your children?

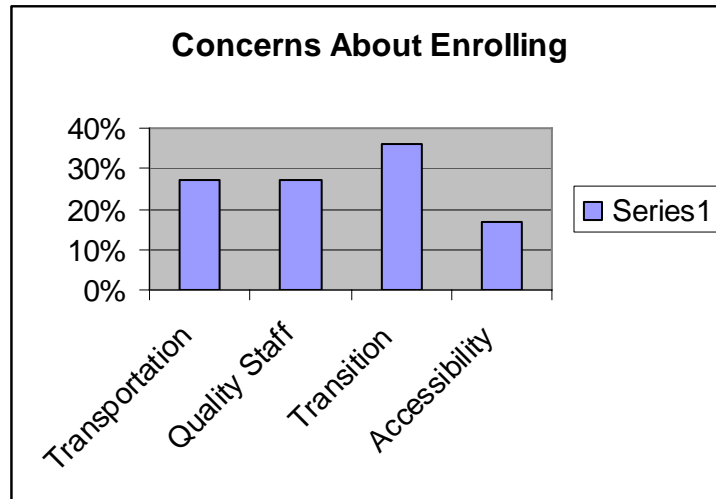


Figure 12 - Concerns About Enrolling

Figure 12 represents only the primary concerns that each focus group member shared about enrolling his/her child in early childhood programs. The research participants reported that transition into kindergarten was of the highest priority. Transportation and quality staff shared the second level of concern. Accessibility in location and available openings for children in early childhood programs was of the least concern for the parents and primary/caregivers.

Research Question 3: What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?

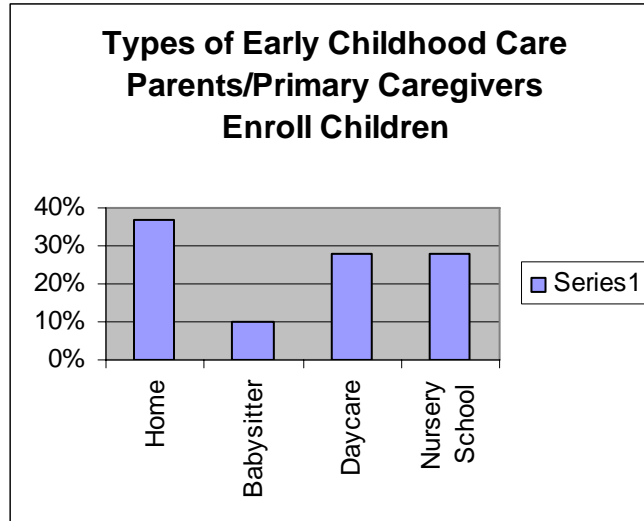


Figure 13 - Types of ECC

Figure 13 represents the primary responses of the focus group members with regard to types of early childhood care (ECC) into which they enroll their children. The majority of focus group participants initially chose to keep their preschoolers at home. The second type of early childhood programs the research participants selected was shared equally by daycare centers and nursery schools. The type with the least participation was in a babysitting setting.

Research Question 4: On what basis did you choose this type of early childhood care (ECC)?

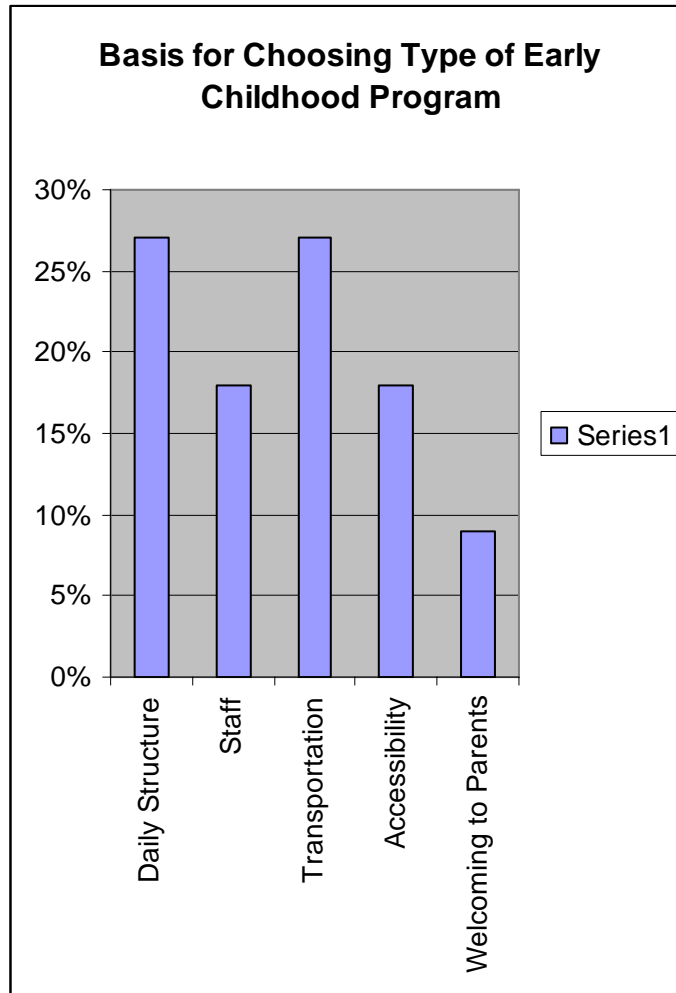


Figure 14 - Basis for Choosing Type of ECC

Figure 14 represents the primary responses of the members of the focus groups with regard to the reasons for the type of early childhood care (ECC) program each selected for his/her child. A structured program and transportation shared the highest reasons for the basis of the types of selection of early childhood programs. Quality staff and accessibility shared the second most selected basis for the early childhood program. Programs that welcomed parents/primary caregivers to participate in their child’s program ranked third in reasons.

Research Question 5: How important is a child’s prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?

The research participants were asked how important prekindergarten programs were on their child’s school readiness. Based on their answers, the following rubric was designed to organize the responses.

Rubric for Data Organizer Question 1 (Research Question 5)

Little Importance	Childcare only (babysitting)
Somewhat Important	Childcare (babysitting) and some socialization
Very Important	Socialization and school readiness skills developed

Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses

Little Importance 0%

Somewhat Important 0%

Very Important 100%

All the research participants responded unanimously that early childhood programs into which they had enrolled their children were very important to their child’s school readiness.

Research Question 6: What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the participants have of the researcher?

When the researcher asked the participants if they had any questions or concerns for the researcher, they discussed the lack of effective communication between early childhood care programs and the community.

Parent Interviews

The parents participating in the interviews have children of preschool and school age in and around the two subsidized housing projects in and around the Steeltown community. Each parent who participated responded to either the flyer posted in the recreational facilities of the housing project or through personal contact by the researcher.

The questions posed to the parents/primary caregivers were as follows:

Table 9 – Research Questions for Parent Interviews

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	6
Parent Involvement Coordinator	X	X	X			X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Focus Groups	X	X	X	X	X	X
Parent/Primary Caregiver Interviews			X	X	X	X

Table 9 displays the numbers of the six research questions and the group of participants to which each question was posed. This representation graphically displays the questions as described in the organizational protocol in Chapter 2. The questions during the individual interviews posed to the parents/primary caregivers are highlighted in Table 9.

3. What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parent/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?
 - 3a. In what type of program has your child been enrolled?
4. On what basis did you choose this type of early childhood care?
 - 4a. What are/were the reasons for your decisions?
 - 4b. Did you go to preschool?
 - 4c. Did you enroll any of your older children in early childhood programs?
 - 4d. If yes, what were the reasons?
 - 4e. If yes, but a different type of program, what were your reasons?
 - 4f. If yes, and the same or similar program, what were your reasons to continue?
 - 4g. If no, what were your reasons?
5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?
 - 5a. What are/were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?
 - 5b. What were the reasons you selected the time frames for your child to attend?
 - 5c. At what age(s) did you enroll your child (children) in an early childhood program?

6. What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community does the participant have of the researcher?

Parent Interview Responses

To analyze the data in a systematic manner, the researcher organized the research questions in the following format. Interview questions were recorded and analyzed by the researcher. Themes related to the research questions were extrapolated and framed as questions for data organization and submitted to Zoomerang Reports/Surveys for analysis. The table below displays the correspondence between the research questions and the interview data organizer questions.

Research Question 6 was not included in the data organizer analysis.

Table 10 – Interview Data Organizer

Research Question	Interview Data Organizer Question
3. What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?	2. What is the participants' awareness level of early childhood programs in the area?
3a. In what type of program has your child been enrolled?	4. What type of early childhood care has the participant enrolled his/her child?
4. On what basis did you choose this type of early childhood care? 4a. What were the reasons for your decisions?	5. On what basis was the type of early childhood program selected?
4b. Did you go to preschool?	12. Did the participant go to preschool?
4c. Did you enroll any of your older children in early childhood programs?	6. Did you enroll older children in any early childhood programs?
4d. If yes, what were the reasons?	8. On what basis was this type of early childhood program selected for your older children?
4e. If yes, but a different type of program, what were your reasons at the time? 4f. If yes, and the same or similar program, what were your reasons to continue? 4g. If no, what were your reasons?	7. Was it the same program?
5. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?	1. How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?
5a. What are/were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?	3. What do these programs provide?
5b. What were the reasons you selected the time frames for your child to attend?	9. At what age did you enroll your children in early childhood programs? 10. If you enrolled your child at age three, what were your reasons? 11. If you enrolled your child at age four, what were your reasons?
5c. At what age(s) did you enroll your child (children) in an early childhood program?	

Table 10 represents the interview data organizer questions and responses as they were submitted to Zoomerang Reports/Surveys for analysis. The responses to each question are documented and have been graphically displayed, when possible, along with a narrative. If the questions are subjective, a rubric defining the possible responses has been developed and included with each question. Each data organizer question is documented below. It also includes the research

question number as represented on the table above, the results of the responses with rubrics and/or graphic representations, and a brief narrative describing the results.

Research Questions followed by Data Organizer Questions

Research Question 3: What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?

Data Organizer Question 2: What is the participants’ awareness level of early childhood programs in the area?

The research participants were asked what types of early childhood programs were available in the Steeltown community. Based on the school district information, there are 27 early childhood programs in the area. The Steeltown population is very transient, and the school district services children from five different municipalities. The researcher considered these variables when developing the following rubric.

Rubric for Data Organizer Question 2 (Research Question 3)

Limited Awareness	1-2 programs
Moderate Awareness	3-5 programs
High Awareness	6 or more programs

Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses

Limited Awareness 38%

Moderate Awareness 31%

High Awareness

31%

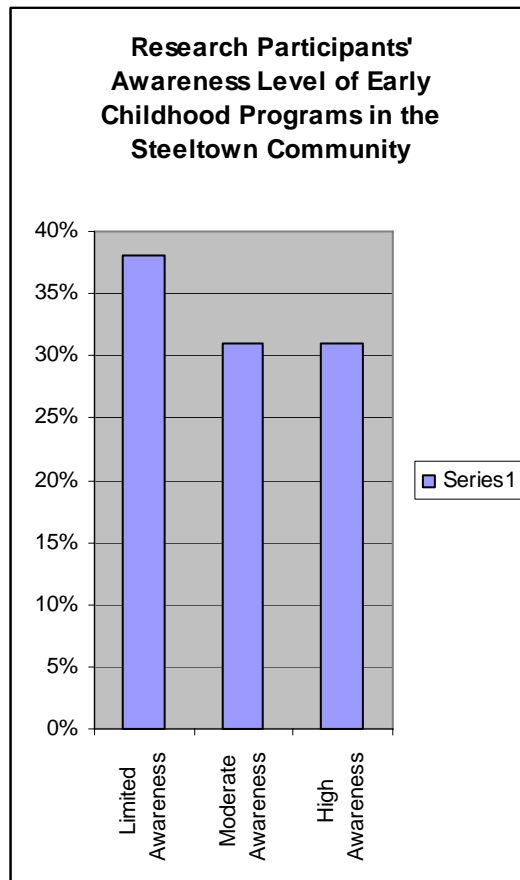


Figure 15 - Research Participants' Awareness Level

Figure 15 represents the level of the research participants' awareness of early childhood programs in the Steeltown community. The criteria used in the rubric is based on the number of early childhood programs as identified in the SASD data as reported by the parent involvement coordinator.

Research Subquestion 3a: In what type of program has your child been enrolled?

Data Organizer Question 4: What types of early childhood care has the participant enrolled his/her children?

Participants were asked to share all the early childhood programs that their children had experienced.

Rubric for Data Organizer Question 4 (Research Question 3a)

Home Parental: Care was given in your home by one of the parents;
Informal Care: Care was given by babysitter or relative in the home of a babysitter or relative;
Daycare Care: Care was given at a daycare location with socialization;
Nursery School: Care was given in a preschool setting with both socialization and school readiness preparation.

Individual Interview Research Participants' Responses

Home	17%
Babysitting	25%
Daycare	33%
Nursery School (Head Start)	100%

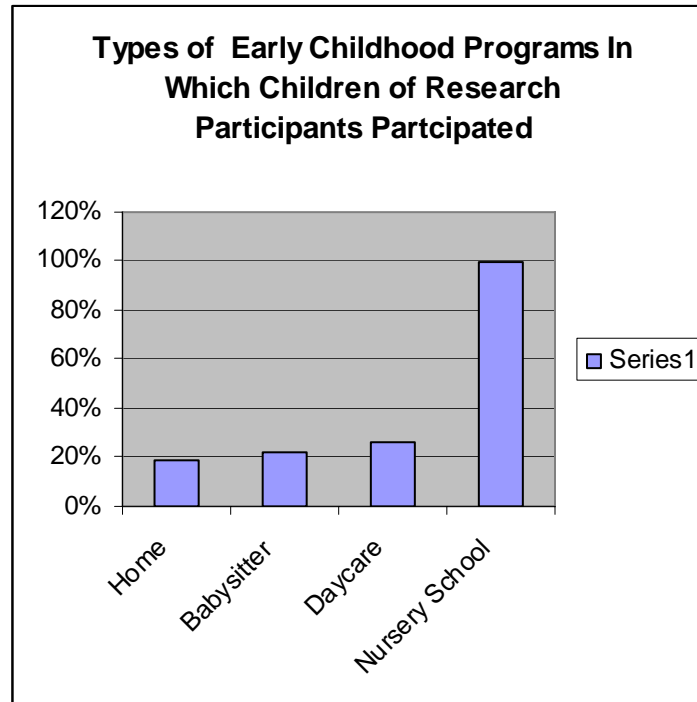


Figure 16 - Types of ECC

Figure 16 represents the research participants’ responses when they were asked to identify all the early childhood care (ECC) programs in which their children had been enrolled since infancy.

Since all the participants have preschoolers who have been or are currently enrolled in the Head Start programs within the Steeltown community, the table displays that 100% attend or attended a nursery school as defined in the rubric. Since the research participants were asked to identify all the early childhood care (ECC), the total responses represent more than 100%.

Research Question 4: On what basis did you choose this early childhood care?

Research Subquestion 4a: What were the reasons for your decisions?

Data Organizer Question 5: On what basis was the type of early childhood program selected?

The rubric used in defining the responses follows:

Location: in and around the neighboring community of the two subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community.
Accessibility/Convenience: accessible and convenient as viewed through the participants' ability to transport their children, by walking or bussing (no cost to the parents/caregivers), and the location of the bus stops.
Cost: the cost of enrolling a preschooler in an early childhood program.
Availability: enrollment slots available
Quality: certified staff in early childhood education and a structured program that provides school readiness experiences with regard to academics and socialization.
Recommendation of Others: based on the conversations with family members, friends, and neighbors whose children have experienced the early childhood program.

Individual Interview Research Participants' Responses

Location	46%
Accessibility/Convenience	46%
Cost	38%
Availability	54%
Quality	69%
Recommendation of Others	69%

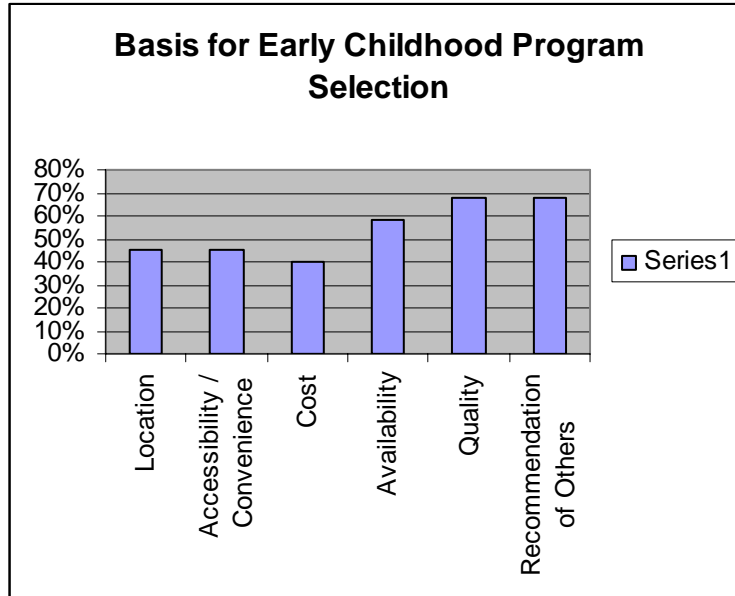


Figure 17 - Basis for ECC

Figure 17 represents the research participants’ responses when asked to share all the reasons for the early childhood care (ECC) programs selected. Quality and recommendation of others shared the majority of the reasons for the basis of the selection, and availability was the second reason for the basis of the selection of early childhood care. Location and accessibility shared the next reason for the basis of selection, and cost was reported as the least basis for the selection of the program. Each research participant shared all his/her reasons for the basis of their selection.

Therefore the total percentages of the responses represent more than 100%.

Research Subquestion 4b: Did you go to preschool?

Data Organizer Question 12: Did the participant go to preschool?

Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses

Yes 54%

No 46%

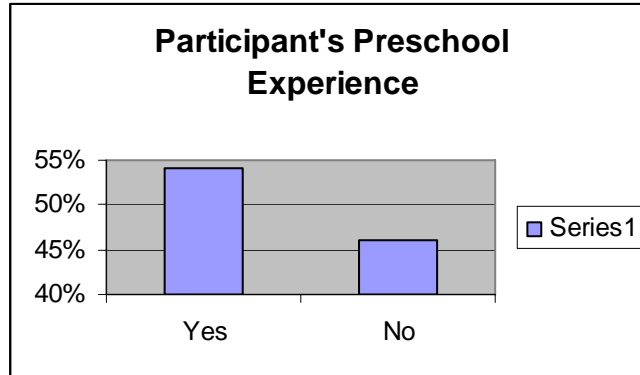


Figure 18 – Participant’s Preschool Experience

Figure 18 displays a graphic representation as to whether or not the parents/primary caregivers interviewed attended any early childhood programs when each was of preschool age. The majority of research participants during the interview process attended some type of prekindergarten program themselves.

Research Subquestion 4c: Did you enroll your older children in any early childhood programs?

Data Organizer Question 6: Did you enroll your older children in any early childhood programs?

Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses

Yes	69%
No	8%
Not Applicable (no other children)	23%

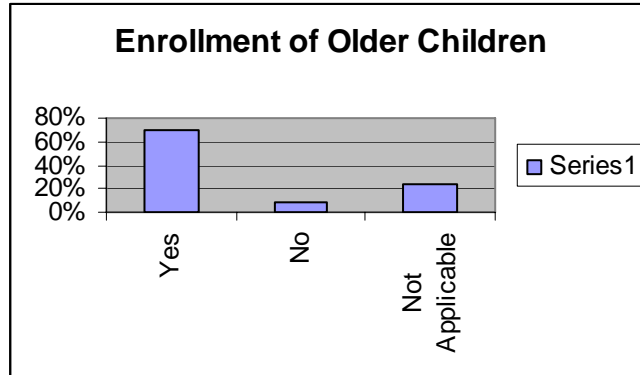


Figure 19 - Enrollment of Older Children

Figure 19 represents the parents/primary caregivers' older children's involvement in an early childhood program. The majority of research participants, if they had older children, had enrolled their older children in an early childhood program.

Research Subquestion 4d: If yes, what were the reasons?

Data Organizer Question 8: On what basis was this type of early childhood program selected?

The rubric used in defining the responses follows:

Location: in and around the neighboring community of the two subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community.
Accessibility/Convenience: accessible and convenient as viewed through the participants' ability to transport their children, by walking or bussing (no cost to the parents/caregivers), and the location of the bus stops.
Cost: the cost of enrolling a preschooler in an early childhood program.
Availability: enrollment slots available.
Quality: certified staff in early childhood education and a structured program that provides school readiness experiences with regard to academics and socialization.
Recommendation of Others: based on the conversations with family members, friends, and neighbors whose children have experienced the early childhood program.

Individual Interview Research Participants' Responses

Location	38%
Accessibility	38%
Cost	23%
Availability	46%
Quality	54%
Recommendation of Others	46%

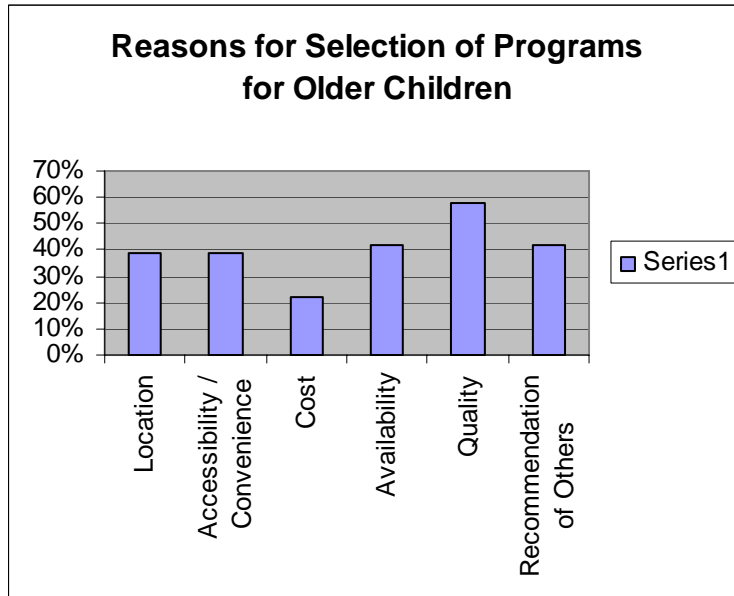


Figure 20 - Reasons for Selection

Figure 20 represents the research participants' responses when asked to share all the reasons they had for choosing to enroll their older children in early childhood programs. The results of the

reasons the research participants chose to send their older children reflected similar reasons for sending their current enrolled preschoolers.

Research Subquestion 4e: If yes, but a different type of program, what were your reasons at the time?

Research Subquestion 4f: If yes, and the same or similar program, what were your reasons?

Research Subquestion 4g: If no, what were your reasons?

Data Organizer Question 7: Was it the same/similar program?

Individual Interview Research Participants' Responses

Yes	62%
No	15%
Not Applicable	23%

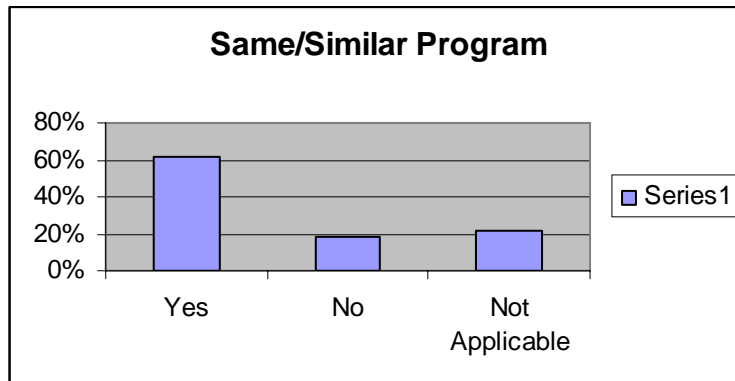


Figure 21 - Same/Similar ECC

Figure 21 graphically displays whether or not the research participants enrolled their older children in the same/similar early childhood care (ECC) program. The majority of research participants chose the same or similar early childhood care program for their older children. Those research participants who have no older children represent the not applicable category.

Research Question 5: How important is a child’s prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?

Data Organizer Question 1: How important is a child’s prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5) experiences on kindergarten school readiness?

The research participants were asked how important a prekindergarten experience was on school readiness. Based on their answers, the following rubric was designed to organize the responses.

Rubric for Data Organizer Question 1 (Research Question 5)

Little Importance	Childcare only (babysitting)
Somewhat Important	Childcare (babysitting) and some socialization
Very Important	Socialization and school readiness skills developed

Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses

Little Importance	0%
Somewhat Important	0%
Very Important	100%

All the research participants responded unanimously that early childhood programs into which they had enrolled their children were very important to their children’s school readiness.

Research Subquestion 5a: What were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?

Data Organizer Question 3: What do these programs provide?

The following rubric was used to define the response terms.

Academics: School readiness preparation
Socialization: Interaction with other children and adults
Other: Babysitting/care without the parent or relative

Individual Interview Research Participants’ Responses

Academics	100%
Socialization	100%
Other	38%

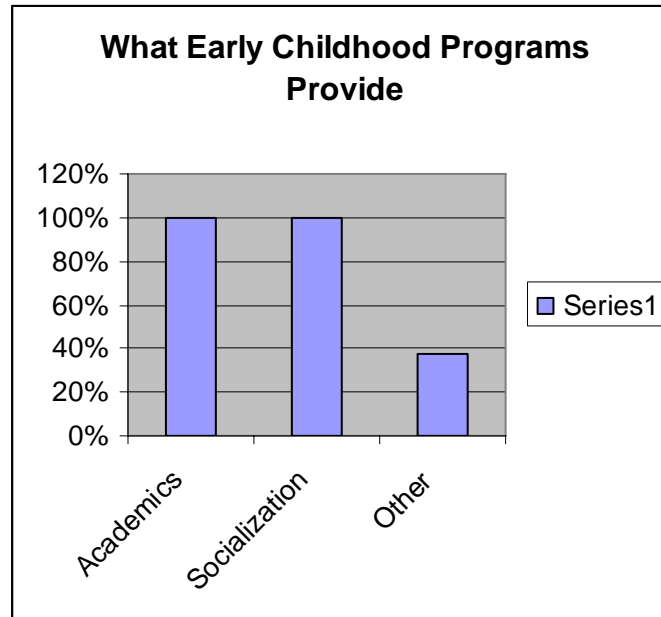


Figure 22 - What ECC Programs Provide

Figure 22 represents all the responses of what early childhood care (ECC) programs provided as reported by the research participants. Therefore the totals represent more than 100%. The responses are based on the criteria described in the rubric above. The research participants reported that the early childhood care programs had met their expectations.

Research Subquestion 5b: What were the reasons you selected the time frames for your child to attend?

The research participants reported that the schedule of the early childhood programs into which they had enrolled their children dictated the time frames that their children would attend.

However, many of the research participants also reported that because of the schedule (number of days, times) of the particular early childhood program, it better fit the parents' needs.

Research Subquestion 5c: At what age(s) did you enroll your child (children) in an early childhood program?

Data Organizer Question 9: At what age did you enroll your child in an early childhood program?

Data Organizer Question 10: If you enrolled your child at age three, what were your reasons?

Data Organizer Question 11: If you enrolled your child at age four what were your reasons?

Individual Interview Research Participants' Responses

three years old 21%

four years old 78%

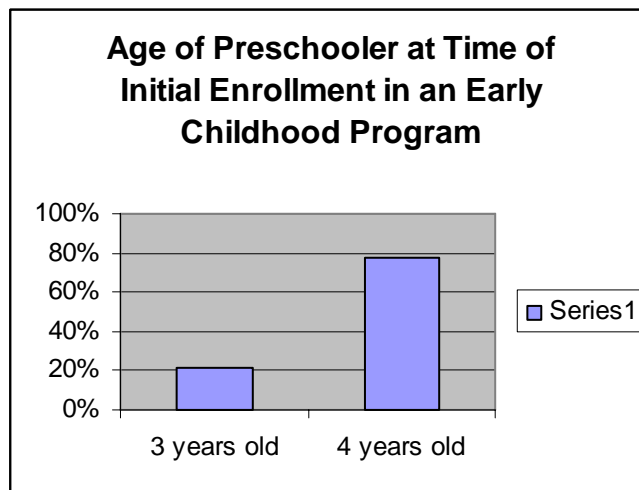


Figure 23 - Age of Preschooler At Enrollment

Figure 23 displays the ages of the children of the research participants at the time of initial enrollment in an early childhood program. Of the 14 interview participants, three enrolled their

children at age three, and 11 enrolled their children at the age of four. The research participants reported that the age in which they enrolled their children in an early childhood program was based on both the parent's and child's needs.

Research Question 6: What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community does the research participant have of the researcher?

The interview participants responded to this question by stating:

They support early childhood programs in the community and questioned if the district would provide these programs in all the elementary buildings. Their hope is for all children to have these preschool experiences.

SUMMARY OF THE DATA

Outline of the Study

Quality early childhood education is related to student learning and success. Research has demonstrated that the quality of a child's early learning environment and social experiences are the foundations for successful school and life experiences. Findings have suggested that early childhood experiences can furnish a window of opportunity for enriching input. However, it is also suggested that social stressors such as poverty and dysfunctional home environments may have the opposite effect and pose a window of vulnerability to early childhood development. The disparity in the quality, availability, and accessibility of early childhood education experiences is dependent on geographic residence, family income, educational levels of the parents, and the value placed on education by the parents and the greater community. Therefore, based on these

factors, participation in quality early childhood education programs for many preschoolers is limited.

The Steeltown community once enjoyed the benefits offered by a thriving community, but now the negative effects caused by the decline of the economy are realized by many in and around the William Pitt region of Pennsylvania. These negative effects have impacted the children in this community at the earliest experiences of their education. Specifically, the children in and around the two housing projects identified in the Steeltown community have been impacted by either their participation in or lack of participation in quality early childhood experiences. This investigation explored the reasons for limited participation in quality early childhood education programs when enrollment openings exist in the Steeltown community.

Preparing all students to begin school ready to learn is imperative to their future success. During the past decade there has been a steady increase in scientific evidence that establishes the undeniable importance of the early years in human development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research suggests that although brain development begins in utero and continues through adolescence, the brain undergoes its most dramatic growth in the early years of life (Nelson & Bloom, 1997). Failing to foster this development and seize upon these critical periods have been evidenced in poor school performance in the primary grades reported in the disaggregated results of subgroups. It is extremely unlikely that children who start school academically behind their peers ever catch up. Fortunately, recent policy trends have created opportunities for the nation to assume a new and influential role in school readiness through the provision of comprehensive early childhood programs and services.

Given the presence of early childhood programs in a community and the importance of quality early childhood education on a child's future academic success as supported in the literature, this study examined the reasons parents/primary caregivers choose to have their preschool age children participate or not participate in quality early childhood education programs. The researcher examined the early childhood experiences of some of the children from the Steeltown community who reside in either of the two subsidized housing projects and/or their immediate neighborhoods. Using the exploratory case study methodology, the researcher interviewed and conducted focus groups with parents/primary caregivers of children who reside in and around the two Steeltown subsidized housing projects. The researcher also conducted an in depth examination of the SASD's information on early childhood programs in the area by interviewing the school district's parent involvement coordinator and by studying school district demographic information.

The merits of early childhood education have been documented in the review of the literature in Chapter 1. In this literature review the researcher has documented the following key features of quality early childhood programs:

- school readiness
- impact on future student achievement
- quality early childhood programs
- potential influence on economic development

As Yin, 1994 suggests, exploratory case study strives towards a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action. Cultural systems of action refer to sets of interrelated activities engaged in or by the research participants in a social situation. The unit of analysis in the case study is typically

a system of action, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined. The unit of analysis in this study was the parents/primary caregivers' decisions concerning their preschool age children's participation in or lack of participation in quality early childhood education. The purpose of the study was to identify the reasons parents/primary caregivers in the Steeltown area choose to enroll or not enroll their children in quality early childhood programs.

The researcher began this study by organizing a framework that included presenting the research questions in a systematic manner. This framework specifically identified the participant or group of participants that the research questions were intended and a methodical structure for analysis. However, as the study and analysis evolved the researcher ascertained that this systematic framework of data collection and analysis began to be more of a genesis for an intertwining and connecting of data collection and analysis not expected. As the study progressed, the researcher reviewed exploratory case study research methodology. Exploratory case study is utilized to gain a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action that include interrelated activities engaged in or by the research participants in a social situation. In the discourse that occurred during the interviews and focus groups and the analysis that followed, the researcher gained insight into this cultural system being studied that moved beyond the research questions. What evolved was a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants being studied from each of the many different perspectives within it.

Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses (Tellis, 1997), which means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the research participants, but groups of research participants and the interaction between them. They give a voice to the powerless and voiceless.

In case studies some type of analysis strategy must be developed that will lead to conclusions. In this case study a case description was developed which would be the framework for the study's organization. The research questions have been organized according to the themes as described in the connection to the conceptual framework displayed in Table 4 of Chapter 2:

- 1) knowledge of early childhood programs,
- 2) basis for the type of early childhood care and the level of school readiness based on the type of early childhood experiences,
- 3) unanticipated outcomes of the study.

As this descriptive narrative evolves, the researcher will link the themes described in this connection to the conceptual framework and their relationship to the key features of quality early childhood programs documented in the literature review: school readiness, student achievement, quality programming and staff, and future economic development.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA BASED ON THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Knowledge of Early Childhood Programs

Research Question 1: What are the early childhood programs in the area?

Each research participant, whether during an individual interview or as a member of a focus group, was asked to identify the early childhood programs in the area. The SASD information on early childhood sites is also listed. The information gathered from the interviews only, is organized according to the following rubric: The results of the responses are displayed in the table following the rubric.

Limited Awareness	1-2 programs
Moderate Awareness	3-5 programs
High Awareness	6 or more programs

Table 11 – Research Participants’ Knowledge of Early Childhood Programs in the Steeltown Community

SASD	Focus Groups	Interviews
27 early childhood sites	4 sites	38% Low
		31% Moderate
		31% High

Table 11 displays the SASD information of early childhood sites and the research participants’ knowledge of early childhood program sites in the Steeltown community. The data collected during the focus groups demonstrates that those research participants had knowledge of only four specific early childhood sites. The responses collected during the interviews are reported according to the rubric above. Based on the data of the school district’s number of early childhood sites, knowledge of the parents/primary caregivers gathered during the interviews is low to moderate. The information reported demonstrated that parents/primary caregivers are unaware of the variety of early childhood education programs available in the Steeltown community. The results of the following subquestion support this information.

Research Subquestion 1a: How did you learn about the early childhood programs in the area?

Most of the communication that parents/primary caregivers receive about these programs is distributed by the school district. However, the research participants also reported that

communication from the local housing authorities, the programs in which their children had been enrolled in the previous year, outside agencies, and word of mouth were all means to learn about available early childhood programs.

The parents/primary caregivers shared that the communication between the available early childhood programs and the parents/primary caregivers is not effective. All the members of the focus groups reported that this lack of quality communication is a limiting factor to enrollment, since many parents/primary caregivers are not aware that early childhood programs exist or have available enrollment openings. The research participants expressed that many parents and primary caregivers of preschoolers have no connection to the school district and have limited communication with outside agencies.

The focus group participants offered other means of communication that might help improve the awareness of early childhood programs. They stated that notification in doctors' offices, clinics, grocery stores, and television/news may be ways of raising the preschool parents/primary caregivers' awareness. One participant mentioned that it would not be beneficial to advertise in the local newspaper since many people don't read it.

Research Question 2: What do these programs provide?

Research Subquestion 2a: What were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?

The findings of Research Question 2 and Subquestion 2a have been combined. Each research participant, whether during an individual interview or as a member of a focus group, was asked to identify what the early childhood programs provide based on priority: academics,

socialization, or childcare. More specifically, the research participants were asked to identify the expectations they had of early childhood programs. The information gathered from the school district is based on the 2005 SASD Parent Kindergarten Survey. The results of the responses are listed below. The information is displayed under each group ranked from highest to lowest in priority.

Table 12 - Expectations of Research Participants

SASD	Focus Groups	Interviews
Socialization	Academics	Academics and Socialization
Academics	Socialization	Childcare
Childcare	Childcare	

Table 12 displays the expectations parents/primary caregivers have of early childhood care programs. Based on the information regarding the expectations of early childhood experiences, academics and socialization are of the highest priority among the parents/primary caregivers. Childcare was listed as the lowest expectation of early childhood programs. This information evidences that parents/primary caregivers value early childhood education for both academics and socialization. However, the interpretation of the meaning of academics and socialization to parents/primary caregivers is limited in scope to learning letters and numbers and sharing with others.

Research Subquestion 2a (i): Is there any way to identify the numbers of three and four year old children in the Steeltown community?

This subquestion was an item on the parent kindergarten survey. It was not asked directly to the research participants in the focus groups or individual interviews. Based on the SASD 2005-06 Kindergarten Parent Survey, the majority of parents responded that they had no younger children at home. The second largest response was that there is one preschooler at home, and 15 parents responded that there were two or more preschool age children at home. This data only represents the parents/primary caregivers of the 2005-06 kindergarten class who responded to the question on the survey. During the focus groups, the parents/primary caregivers indirectly responded to this question. In case study analysis, information is shared in a manner that the researcher is able to gain insight to many areas without asking direct questions. This was the case with regard to the number of younger children at home as shared by the focus group participants. When the discussion in the focus groups centered around transportation concerns, the parents/primary caregivers in the focus groups reported, indirectly, that many of them had younger than kindergarten age children at home.

Research Subquestion 2b: What were the concerns you had about enrolling your children?

This question was posed to the parents/primary caregivers during the focus groups. The school district currently has no information regarding the concerns that parents/primary caregivers have about the early childhood programs in the Steeltown community. This question was not asked during the individual interviews. It also relates to Research Question 3 (that follows) which asks the research participants for the basis of their early childhood selections.

The major concerns about early education programs that the parents/primary caregivers in the focus groups reported are listed below ranked from highest to lowest priority:

- 1) Transition into Kindergarten
- 2) Transportation and Quality Staff (shared equal ranking)
- 3) Accessibility

The participants in the focus groups shared their concern about the importance of the transition from the preschool years into kindergarten. They reported that early childhood programs reduce the problems that many children have when entering kindergarten. From their perspective, children who attended an early childhood program seem to have a smoother transition into kindergarten than children who did not attend. They reported that children who have attended a quality early childhood education program have been exposed to a structured setting outside of the home that also includes developing school readiness and socialization skills. The research participants stated that early childhood programs clearly help smooth the transition between home and school, primarily in the kindergarten school year.

Transportation concerns were reported as the next priority of concern for parents/primary caregivers. Transportation concerns appeared to be interwoven throughout the focus groups' discussions. Parents/primary caregivers stated that bussing should be available in order for preschoolers to attend a quality early childhood care center. They added that the bus stops should be conveniently located in and around the neighborhoods of the housing projects in the community. The current Head Start parents/primary caregivers raised concerns with existing bus stops for the Head Start children. They expressed that not only are these bus stops inconveniently located, they are too few in number. Many parents/primary caregivers reported that they have younger children at home. This poses a great difficulty for the parents/primary caregivers when attempting to get their preschoolers to the designated bus stops.

Another transportation issue was the safety of preschool age children on the buses. Specifically the parents were concerned with:

- The use of seatbelts and booster seats on the Head Start busses
- Having a monitor on the bus to help address the needs of the children during transport and keeping the children safe while meeting the needs of all the children
- The personality of the monitor
- The personality of the bus driver
- The length of time children spend on the bus

Without transportation, the location of quality early childhood care centers brings to light another concern. The research participants reported that even when they have knowledge of enrollment openings in centers outside of their neighborhoods, transportation issues pose a problem. They reported that many parents/primary caregivers do not have the means of transporting their children to the available quality sites. Many use taxi and/or jitney services initially, but find it too costly to continue their child's enrollment. The cost of public transportation limits the parents/primary caregivers' ability to get their children to other quality sites.

Transportation, location, accessibility, and conveniently located available enrollment openings inhibit many parents/primary caregivers residing in and around the two housing projects within the Steeltown community from enrolling their children in quality early childhood care centers. Consequently, they enroll their children in daycare centers, arrange for nearby informal babysitting services, and/or keep their children at home.

The concern that parents/primary caregivers had about quality staff shared the same priority level of concern as transportation issues. The parents/primary caregivers reported that enrolling their children in quality early childhood programs would be their first choice because of the comfort level of knowing that the staff was highly qualified and the staff would also have criminal background clearances from the state. The research participants raised concerns that in informal/unregulated early childhood programs, the staff is sometimes limited in number. This increases the adult child ratio. They also expressed concerns about the educational and criminal backgrounds of the staff in these informal programs. Transportation issues were linked to enrolling their children in a quality early childhood program because transportation is limited to many parents/primary caregivers. Available openings in quality early childhood programs, primarily Head Start, have closed the door for many parents/caregivers. They state that many have knowledge of only one program in their area and when it's filled they know of no others in which to enroll their children. This also ties into the accessibility issue. Since parents/primary caregivers have limited to moderate knowledge of quality early childhood programs, once a particular program is filled, their perception is that that is the only program available to them. They are unaware of other quality programs in their area that may have enrollment openings and they don't seek other programs that may be nearby. This relates to the ineffective communication about early childhood programs that the research participants reported.

Knowledge of Early Childhood Programs and Basis for the Type of Early Childhood Care

Two themes were combined in analyzing the following research question and subquestion. The following question and subquestion were asked of the parents/primary caregivers in the focus

groups and the individual interviews. The school district information was gathered from the SASD 2005 Kindergarten Parent Survey.

Research Question 3: What types of early childhood care (primarily) do parents/primary caregivers enroll their children: home (none), babysitter, daycare, nursery school?

Research Subquestion 3a: In what type of program has your child been enrolled?

The findings of Research Question 3 and Research Subquestion 3a have been combined. Each research participant, whether during an individual interview or as a member of the focus groups, was asked to identify all the early childhood programs in which his/her child participated. The information gathered from the school district is based on the 2005 SASD Kindergarten Parent Survey. The results of the responses are listed below. The information is displayed under each group ranked from the most type of enrollment to the least.

Table 13 - Types of Early Childhood Programs Research Participants Enrolled Their Children

SASD	Focus Groups	Interviews
Preschool	Home	Preschool
Daycare	Daycare and Preschool	Daycare
Home	Babysitter	Babysitter
Babysitter		Home

Table 13 displays the types of early childhood programs parents/primary caregivers in the Steeltown area have enrolled their children. If the research participants had the opportunity to enroll their children in a quality early childhood program in their neighborhood that would be their first choice. However, if the enrollment was full, some participants utilized the services of the recreational centers which provide some structured activities and basic informal childcare, simply because it was conveniently located and easily accessible. Others made the decision to keep their children at home or arranged for other informal/unregulated daycare or babysitting service. The quality of a program, which includes a daily structure and a highly qualified staff, directly relates to the basis for selection of programs by the parents/primary caregivers. It should be noted that the majority of the parents/primary caregivers who participated in this research study have had their children enrolled in last year's Head Start program or this year's Head Start program.

Basis for the Type of Early Childhood Care and the Level of School Readiness Based on the Type of Early Childhood Experiences

The following research questions were asked only of the parents/primary caregivers in the focus groups and individual interviews.

Research Question 4: On what basis is this type of early childhood care chosen by parents/primary caregivers?

Each research participant, whether during an individual interview or as a member of the focus groups, was asked to identify the basis of the type of early childhood program he/she selected for his/her child. The results of the responses are listed below. The information is displayed under each group ranked from highest to lowest in priority.

The following rubric was used in defining the responses:

Location: in/and around the neighboring community of the two subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community.
Accessibility/Convenience/Transportation: accessible and convenient as viewed through the participants' ability to transport their children, by walking/bussing (no cost to the parents/caregivers), and the location of the bus stops.
Cost: the cost of enrolling a preschooler in an early childhood program.
Availability: enrollment slots available.
Quality/Daily Structure: certified staff in early childhood education and a structured program that provides school readiness experiences with regard to academics and socialization.
Welcoming to Parents: a program that encouraged a parent's active participation in their child's learning; an open door policy to visit and observe.

Table 14 - Basis for Selection of ECC of Focus Groups and Interview Participants

Focus groups	Interviews
Daily structured routines and transportation	Quality and recommendation of others
Quality staff and accessibility	Availability in openings
Welcoming to parents	Location and accessibility
	Cost

Table 14 displays the parents/primary caregivers' basis for selection of early childhood care (ECC) programs. The research participants in the focus groups reported that programs with daily structured activities that included highly qualified staff would be their first choice if transportation was available. The research participants raised concerns that in informal/unregulated early childhood programs, the staff is sometimes limited in number, therefore increasing the adult child ratio. They also were concerned with the quality of staff, primarily that in regulated programs the staff must have criminal background checks and have some type of early childhood education training.

Transportation was linked to accessibility to the location of the early childhood program and was another reason for choosing the type of early childhood care site.

Some parents/primary caregivers work in the recreational centers in various capacities and therefore these programs were utilized. The participants stated that the regulated programs (Head Start) welcomed parent/primary caregivers to visit the sites unannounced and in fact encouraged their visitation on a regular basis. This raised the comfort level of enrollment in a regulated program.

The research participants expressed that it would be in the best interest of their children to have them enrolled in a program that exists in the school that their children will be attending in kindergarten. These programs have a structure similar to the school system's daily routine, and help the children make a smoother transition into kindergarten. However, the research participants stated that these programs were limited to one location and enrollment numbers, and thus were unavailable.

Research Subquestion 4c: Did you enroll older children in any early childhood program?

Research Subquestion 4d: If yes, what were your reasons?

Research Subquestion 4e: If yes, but a different type of program, what were your reasons?

Research Subquestion 4f: If yes, and the same or similar program, what were your reasons?

Research Subquestion 4g: If no, what were your reasons?

The research participants reported that if they had older children, the majority had enrolled them in an early childhood program. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the participants had enrolled older children, eight (8%) had not enrolled older children, and 23% had no older children.

During the interviews only, research participants were asked about the basis for which they had selected the programs if they had any older children. The information is displayed below and ranked from highest to lowest in priority.

- Quality
- Recommendation of others and availability

- Location and accessibility
- Cost

Sixty-two percent (62%) of research participants responded that if they had enrolled their older children in an early childhood program, it was either the same or a similar type program. Fifteen percent (15%) had enrolled their older children in a different program, and 23% had no older children. The reasons for enrolling in a different program varied. The responses included 1) they were unaware of programs at the time, 2) they were new to the area, and/or 3) they did not realize the value of an early childhood program.

Research Subquestion 4b: Did you go to preschool?

Only the research participants during the interview process were asked this question.

Just over 50% of the participants attended preschool.

Research Question 5: How important is a child's prekindergarten (approximately from ages 0-5 years) on kindergarten school readiness?

The research participants in the focus groups and the interviews were asked how important the prekindergarten experience is for kindergarten school readiness. The following rubric was designed to organize the responses.

Rubric for Data Organizer Question 1 (Research Question 5)

Little Importance	Childcare only (babysitting)
Somewhat Important	Childcare (babysitting) and some socialization
Very Important	Socialization and school readiness skills developed

Individual Interview Research Participants' Responses and Focus Group Responses

Little Importance	0%
Somewhat Important	0%
Very Important	100%

The research participants responded unanimously that the early childhood programs in which they had enrolled their children were very important to their school readiness.

Research Subquestion 5a, b, and c were asked of the interview participants only.

Research Subquestion 5a: What were your specific expectations with regard to academics, socialization, childcare, or other?

The following rubric was used to define the response terms.

Academics: School readiness preparation
Socialization Interaction: with other children and adults
Other: Babysitting care without the parent or relative

The research participants reported that academics and socialization were what they had expected to be provided for their preschooler. All the participants stated that their expectations were met and that their children were well prepared for kindergarten.

Research Subquestion 5b: What were the reasons you selected the time frames for your child to attend?

Research Subquestion 5c: At what age did you enroll your child (children) in an early childhood program?

Of the 14 interview participants, three had enrolled them at three years of age, and 11 had enrolled them at four years of age. The group of parents who enrolled their children at the age of three reported that they had younger children at home, needed help with childcare because of employment reasons, and also that it was recommended by family, friends, or an outside agency. The group of parents who enrolled their children at the age of four reported that they had refrained from enrolling their children in a program at age three because of their separation anxiety. Some of the children were first born, some of the children were the youngest, and some of the children were only children. This was evident throughout the conversations in the interview process. Additionally, these parents/primary caregivers had reservations about the quality of the staff, programs, and safety in early childhood centers.

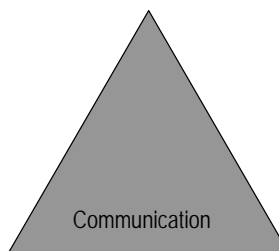
FINDINGS BASED ON THE UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Research Question 6: What comments or questions regarding the context of early childhood education programs in the community do the research participants have of the researcher?

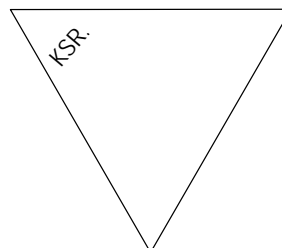
The comments of the research participants at the end of the sessions combined with the conversations throughout the interviews and focus groups generated unanticipated outcomes which led to the research findings. These research findings appeared to have had an impact on the parents/primary caregivers' decisions to enroll or not enroll their children in quality programs.

Research Findings

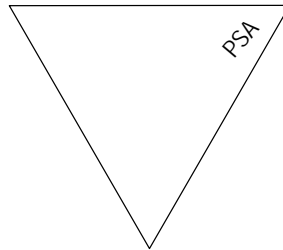
- ***Communication:*** Communication between parents/primary caregivers has emerged as the most significant reason for participation or lack of participation in quality early childhood programs.



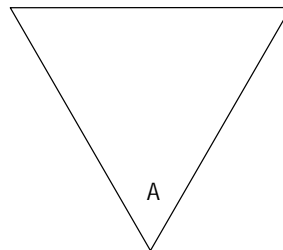
- ***Knowledge of School Readiness (KSR):*** Parents/primary caregivers' knowledge of what school readiness entails is primarily focused on learning numbers, letters, and getting along with others.



- **Parent separation anxiety (PSA):** Parents/primary caregivers express suffering from parent child separation anxiety.



- **Accessibility (A):** Accessibility to quality early childhood program sites is impacted because of the lack of transportation coupled with the limited knowledge of enrollment openings in other accessible sites.



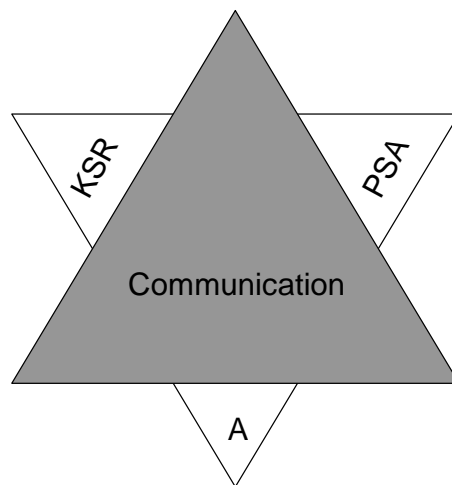
The findings generated by the unanticipated outcomes represent the concerns of parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children in and around the subsidized housing projects in the Steeltown community.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

This researcher examined the early childhood experiences of some of the students identified in the Steeltown story. This detailed study identified some of the reasons why parents are not attracted to quality early childhood programs that give children the opportunities that may be available to improve their school readiness skills. Identifying the reasons for not accessing

quality early childhood programs within this area may offer some insight into the parents' beliefs and understanding of the social construction of early childhood. It may direct the future direction of the area's early childhood providers. It has the potential to identify a rationale for investment in early childhood programs as a strategy for future public education and economic development in the region. It may identify the importance of moving beyond the usual suspects (stakeholders) when enlisting both individual champions and groups of allies in investing in school readiness (Bruner, 2004a), and enables these stakeholders to begin to define the task, process, and resources to assure the availability of quality early childhood programs for all children in the area.

This researcher has concluded that these findings have formed the basis for the participation or lack of participation in quality early childhood programs. In the conclusions section of Chapter 4, each of the findings and their interrelationships will be described and discussed in detail. This graphic organizer displays the key findings and the interrelationships with each other.



CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE,
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER
RESEARCH, AND DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
PRACTICE

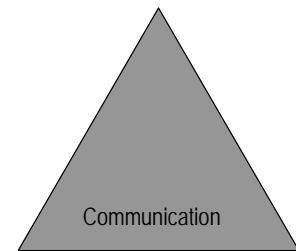
CONCLUSIONS

This descriptive study examined the early childhood education experiences of some of the children who reside in either of the two subsidized housing projects and/or their immediate surrounding neighborhoods in the Steeltown community. The study was conducted to identify the reasons parents/primary caregivers choose to enroll or not enroll their children in quality early childhood programs. The unanticipated outcomes formulated the research findings of this descriptive study. The results of these findings have provided an avenue for deeper and broader understanding of the parents/primary caregivers' decisions about their children's participation in quality early childhood programs.

Communication between parents/primary caregivers has emerged as the most significant reason for participation or lack of participation in quality early childhood programs. The effectiveness of the communication directly relates to the parent/primary caregivers' knowledge of school readiness skills, parent separation anxiety, and accessibility/availability of quality early childhood programs.

Communication

Communication has played a major role on the parents/primary caregivers' decision making process regarding their children's participation or non-participation in quality early childhood education programs. The parents/primary caregivers reported that the most effective manner of communication regarding early childhood programs was distributed through the school system by older children in the family. However, for parents/primary caregivers who have no children in the school system, this manner of communication is not available. They also expressed that outside agencies, such as Even Start and Family Links, distribute information, but unless the parents/primary caregivers have some affiliation with these early childhood care agencies on an ongoing basis, no communication regarding early childhood programs is received. The research participants reported that communicating information about early childhood programs is extremely limited.



The narrative describing the responses of Research Subquestion 2a (i) with regard to the number of preschool age children at home supports this finding. The responses of the SASD 2005 Parent Kindergarten Survey contrasted with the responses reported by the focus group participants. The researcher concludes that the parent kindergarten survey targeted a small group of parents/primary caregivers' responses and was not necessarily an accurate representation of the number of preschoolers in the Steeltown community. The school district has perceived the information gathered through the parent survey as an accurate representation of the number of preschool age children in the Steeltown community. However, the responses of the research participants in the focus groups lead the researcher to question its validity. The parent survey reported that most families had no younger than kindergarten age children at home. The focus

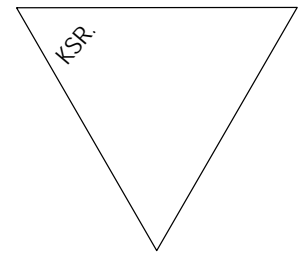
group participants reported the difficulties they experienced when getting their preschoolers to the bus stop locations because of having to take their younger than preschool age children with them to the bus stop locations. This indicated to the researcher that there were other younger children at home.

Communication may be defined as an exchange of information by all parties involved. The discrepancy in the number of preschoolers, as evidenced by the responses of the two groups, leads the researcher to question the effectiveness of communication between quality early childhood providers/teachers and the parents/primary caregivers. The researcher concludes that an effective community wide communication system that exchanges accurate information is non-existent to many who reside in the Steeltown area.

Knowledge of School Readiness (KSR)

Parents/primary caregivers' knowledge of what school readiness entails is primarily focused on learning numbers, letters, colors, and getting along with others. All the research participants expressed the need for and the importance of their children learning their numbers, letters, colors, and socialization skills such as getting along with others, sharing, and developing some independence. But this seemed to be the extent of all the parents/primary caregivers' interpretation of school readiness skills. School readiness goes far beyond these expectations.

Even though the research participants' knowledge of school readiness is limited, they realize that the transition for preschoolers into kindergarten is of the highest priority. They expressed a great need for positive transitioning that quality early childhood programs provide. Each research participant implied how important it was for his/her child to be as prepared for kindergarten as



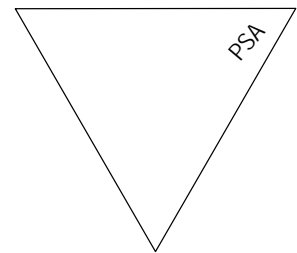
other children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The ready schools concept focuses on young children's school transitions (Early, 2004). But the key ingredients to a successful transition are activities and events (over and above preschool and school programs) that are designed to overcome the discontinuities that may disrupt children's learning and development (Love et al., 1992).

Parents/primary caregivers report that quality early childhood care is very important for positive transitioning into kindergarten, but their knowledge of school readiness skills is limited. This researcher concludes that the Steeltown parents/primary caregivers and quality early childhood providers/teachers have different perceptions of school readiness skills. The researcher concludes that an effective community wide communication system that exchanges accurate information is non-existent to many who reside in the Steeltown area and has impacted the parents/primary caregivers' knowledge of school readiness.

Parent Separation Anxiety (PSA)

Parents/primary caregivers express suffering from parent child separation anxiety. The research participants expressed great concern for letting their children go to early childhood programs that do not have the following:

- highly qualified staff
- criminal background clearances of staff
- structured programs
- consistency of a qualified staff

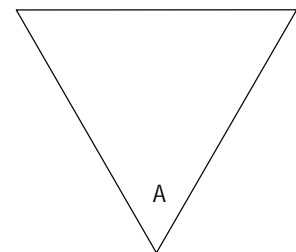


- programs that welcome parents’ announced and unannounced visitations
- safe methods of transportation

Initially, the parents/primary caregivers expressed that a reason for not enrolling their children was because of the children’s birth order: that is first born, only child, or the youngest in the family. But upon deeper examination of the conversations between the researcher and the research participants, the above mentioned concern suggested that the actual reason for not enrolling their children was parent child separation anxiety. That is interpreted as the parent’s reluctance to separate from the child. The research on the topic of parent child separation anxiety is very limited. However, it appears that this is a phenomenon that exists nonetheless. Without knowledge of, access to, and availability of enrollment openings in quality early childhood programs that address the concerns that the parents/primary caregivers have expressed for not enrolling their children, the decisions to keep preschool age children at home have been viewed as the safest option. The researcher concludes that an effective community wide communication system that exchanges accurate information is non-existent to many who reside in the Steeltown area and has presented the phenomenon of parent separation anxiety evidenced in this study.

Accessibility (A)

Accessibility to quality early childhood program sites is impacted because of the lack of transportation coupled with the limited knowledge of availability of enrollment openings in other available quality sites. The research participants reported that if the quality early



childhood program enrollments in their neighborhood were filled, they had limited or no knowledge of another program that existed. Some participants expressed that even if they knew of another program, they were limited because of transportation issues.

The discrepancy between the number of quality early childhood program sites in the Steeltown area and the parents/primary caregivers' knowledge and perception of those sites impacts the number of preschool age children who have attended these programs. Parents/primary caregivers' perceptions of what is available, accessible, and of high quality are dependent on communicating and dissipating accurate information. The parent/primary caregivers' reluctance to place their children in programs has been warranted by their lack of knowledge of quality early childhood programs. The researcher concludes that an effective community wide communication system that exchanges accurate information is non-existent to many who reside in the Steeltown area and has impacted the parents/primary caregivers' perceptions of accessibility to high quality early education programs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Research has demonstrated important links between quality early childhood education programs and student learning and success. Each year hundreds of thousands of children enter kindergarten unprepared to meet the intellectual demands of school (Carnegie Corp. of New York, 1995).

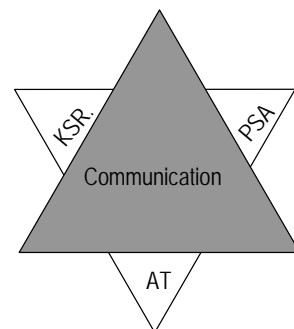
This is especially true for students who are at risk of later school failure due to factors such as poverty. This evidence is particularly strong with respect to school readiness for children from families of limited education and low-income (Ramey & Ramey, 2002).

The children of the parents/primary caregivers who participated in this study have either attended or are planning to attend a high quality early childhood education program prior to kindergarten.

Unfortunately, the majority of the preschool age children in and around the two subsidized housing neighborhoods in the Steeltown community are among the thousands of children across the nation who are unprepared to meet the intellectual demands of kindergarten. The information gathered from the parents/primary caregivers has given great insight into what is needed to help that majority of children in the Steeltown area not attending quality early childhood care before entering kindergarten. This study has also demonstrated that quality matters to parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children in the Steeltown community.

Research has demonstrated that the experiences of preschool age children impact their school readiness. However, communication between the parents/primary caregivers and early childhood providers about available quality early childhood education programs appears to be ineffective to many who reside in the Steeltown area. The information gathered from this research study suggests that there are differences between the perceptions of parents/primary caregivers and early childhood education providers as to what school readiness entails. It also suggests that parents/primary caregivers are unwilling to enroll their children in informal/unregulated early childhood programs that do not meet their comfort level and this results in parent child separation anxiety. Lastly, the results of this study bring to the forefront the lack of accessibility to high quality early childhood programs that promote the school readiness skills necessary for a successful kindergarten experience, and ultimately future academic achievement.

A communication system that promotes relationships between families and quality early childhood providers has the potential to



- enhance the understanding of the skills and knowledge children need as they enter kindergarten;
- bridge the gap that has evolved between parents/primary caregivers and early childhood education providers as to the high quality programs that exist in the Steeltown community and remedy the parent separation anxiety;
- develop an awareness of the accessibility and availability to quality early childhood education programs.

Communication between parents/primary caregivers has emerged as the most significant reason for participation or lack of participation in quality early childhood programs. The effectiveness of the communication directly relates to the parent/primary caregivers' knowledge of school readiness skills, parent separation anxiety, and accessibility/availability of quality early childhood programs. A policy implication may be that early childhood providers examine the current communication system between parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children and the early childhood services and programs that exist in the Steeltown community.

Parents/primary caregivers have expressed the importance of quality early childhood education experiences on the transition into kindergarten. A broader understanding of the skills and knowledge associated with school readiness would enhance the parents/primary caregivers' awareness of school readiness and ultimately would benefit their preschool age children. A policy implication may be to develop a community wide understanding of school readiness skills by establishing a communication system that infiltrates the barriers that appear to exist between the parents/primary caregivers in and around the two subsidized housing projects and the early childhood care/education providers. This may include offering programs/conversations within

the neighborhoods of the housing projects that provide information on literacy, language activities for families, and skills that promote working independently and following directions.

The research participants expressed great concerns about letting their children go to early childhood programs because of their lack of knowledge that quality programs exist to serve their children. It is a sensitive time for parents/primary caregivers when they place their children in an early childhood program because it means they must now put complete trust in their children's caregiver. But the communication system that provides accurate information regarding quality early childhood programs that promote parent involvement that exist in and around the neighborhoods of the Steeltown housing projects appears to be ineffective. A policy implication may be to examine the methods that best communicate information promoting quality early childhood programs in and around the Steeltown area and highlighting the parent involvement components that are encouraged. This system may also help parents/primary caregivers with the tools to foster the learning experiences at home. Establishing partnerships between the early childhood providers and the home would help to resolve some of the parent child separation anxiety concerns.

Accessibility to enrollment openings in quality early childhood program sites outside the neighborhoods of the housing projects poses transportation issues for families. This limits access to quality early childhood experiences for many preschoolers from those neighborhoods. A policy implication may be to study current demographic information that identifies the most convenient locations for bus stops before designating those bus stops. The parents/primary caregivers' input with regard to transportation issues should also be included in the bus stop decision making. Inviting the parents/primary caregivers to participate in a collaborative effort

with which to solve the transportation issues may advance the foundation of an effective communication system.

The establishment of an effective communication system that establishes a partnership between the parents/primary caregivers and early childhood providers in the Steeltown community has the potential to increase the school readiness skills of the preschool children. This may result in potential increased future student academic achievement, enhance post high school studies, and ultimately increase the potential economic development of the community. Investment in human capital breeds economic success not only for those being educated, but for the overall economy (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The context of the research study was to provide an understanding of the reasons parents/primary caregivers choose to have their children participate or not participate in early childhood education programs in the Steeltown community. The data was limited to 2005 SASD demographics and information gathered from the parents/primary caregivers in and around the two housing projects in the Steeltown community. The study was limited in that the research participants of the focus groups and the interviews currently have or have had their children enrolled in some type of quality early childhood experience. All of the research participants have had some prior contact with the researcher. The study was also constrained in that the researcher had no success in enlisting the participation of parents/primary caregivers who had no affiliation with the researcher.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study provides a starting point for future research on developing a community wide communication system that would enhance the early childhood educational experiences of preschool age children. Future research could study nontraditional approaches of making connections and building partnerships not only between the families of preschoolers and early childhood education providers, but between parents/primary caregivers and public school systems. Another research study may be to examine the reasons for the lack of trust between parents/primary caregivers and educational systems, primarily public school systems. Another study may examine the relationship between the educational levels of attainment and educational experiences of the parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children. These studies may lead to identifying the reasons parents/primary caregivers are reluctant to enroll children in education programs before they are required to by law. Future research on the difficulties and anxieties parents experience when leaving their preschool age children in the care of early childcare providers may give some insight to parent child separation anxiety. Another study may target the manner with which parents/primary caregivers in and around the housing projects gain access to local information in the community and identify the factors that prohibit the amount of interest the parent/primary caregivers have with knowing and/or taking advantage of the information available. Future research in these areas has the potential to:

- enhance the understanding of the skills and knowledge children need as they enter kindergarten;
- bridge the gap that has evolved between parents/primary caregivers and early childhood education providers as to the high quality programs that exist in the Steeltown community and remedy the parent separation anxiety;

- develop an awareness of the accessibility and availability to quality early childhood education programs.

Further research in developing a community wide understanding of the skills and knowledge important to children as they enter kindergarten may be the key to placing all children at the starting line of the race for academic success.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

This study has demonstrated the lack of an effective communication system between the parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children who reside in and around the Steeltown community housing projects and quality early childhood care providers. The interweaving threads of an effective communication system between parents/primary caregivers who reside in and around the neighborhoods of the housing projects in the Steeltown community and early childhood providers appear to be fragmented and disjointed. This study has also led this researcher to question the effectiveness of the communication system between the SASD and the residents of those neighborhoods.

As a community activist and educator in the Steeltown area, I have been challenged over the years on how to best represent and advocate on behalf of the children and families of my community. More specifically, I have struggled on how to best serve the children in and around the two subsidized housing projects with whom I have been charged. Upon reflection of this study, I realized I never have examined the effectiveness of the manner in which I communicated with the families of my children.

As a parent, I had the same concerns about letting go of my own child when considering enrolling her in an early childhood program. I experienced the same parent child separation concerns as the research participants. The communication system that existed provided me with the knowledge of what quality programs were, where they existed, access to transportation, and what programs might best suit her needs. This communication system somewhat alleviated my parent child separation anxiety. During the course of this study, I realized that the communication system that served me and my needs as a parent has not served the parents/primary caregivers residing in and around the neighborhoods of the Steeltown housing projects. It appears that a one size fits all communication system is not necessarily an ineffective one. Rather, to many parents/primary caregivers, it is non-existent.

What follows demonstrates this point.

Some of the parents/primary caregivers shared that the local newspaper, one from which I gather local information, is not an avenue that would communicate information to the parents/primary caregivers in and around the housing projects. Consequently I had to ask myself why. Was it that these parents/primary caregivers don't subscribe to the newspaper, don't make it a practice of purchasing a newspaper, or are unable to read at the level at which the newspaper is written?

During the course of an interview with a parent, I shared the Head Start poster announcing the program that was available in the school district. The parent pointed out that the information on the poster did indeed state that a program was available. But she stated that parents/primary caregivers would assume that the program referred to on the poster was the only one available, and to her knowledge, was already full. I asked why

she wouldn't make a telephone call to find out more information. She stated that it represented the only program in the area and she had already heard that it had a full enrollment. Consequently, I had to ask myself why one wouldn't make inquiries as to other programs. I know, as a parent, I would do so.

I began to question the other means of communication used to inform parents/primary caregivers. The television media, the internet (specifically the school district website), flyers and posters certainly have a target audience, but is the target audience the parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children in the Steeltown community? It seems apparent to me that “we are missing the boat” when it comes to communicating with the parents/primary caregivers of preschoolers in the at risk communities of the Steeltown area.

Perhaps the means of communication that are in place in the Steeltown community are, metaphorically speaking, building blocks that are stacked on an unstable foundation. The foundation I refer to has not been established and is, metaphorically speaking, shaky. The fragmented and disjointed means of communication are not strong enough to support the building blocks and therefore can topple easily. A future recommendation for practice may be to step back and examine the strengths of the Steeltown community, and use them as the foundation of an effective communication system.

The Steeltown community is rich in culture, ethnicity, and traditions. Events that showcase these riches have been in place for many years in this community. These events are patronized by most of the citizens in the community, including those living in and around the neighborhoods of the housing projects. Future recommendations for practice in improving the communication links between not only the parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children and early childcare

providers, but also communication with others who have a stake in the future of this community could be capitalized through these events. Communication may be defined as an exchange of information by all parties involved. Using these events to further the communication system may be practical avenues to explore.

School picnic day at Kennywood Park, a local amusement park, has been a standing event on the second Thursday of June for many years in the Steeltown community. This event is the highlight of the end of the school year and is patronized by many families in the Steeltown community. A recommendation could be to form a collaborative task force including members of the community, Kennywood Park, early childhood care providers, and school district personnel. This task force could be charged with establishing an effective communication system to disseminate information on quality early childhood programs in the Steeltown community and gather demographics to better serve the preschool age children in the community.

International Village is an event that has been embedded in the Steeltown community for nearly fifty years and marks the end of the summer season. This event celebrates the diverse cultures, ethnicities, and traditions of the Steeltown community. Various local businesses and community organizations are represented at this event. It is patronized by many local and regional residents and is sponsored by the City of Steeltown and members of the community chamber of commerce. These two groups represent the economic future of the Steeltown community. Early childhood care providers and local educators could join forces with these community stakeholders to promote quality early childhood programs. A recommendation for practice could be to utilize this event to disseminate information on quality early childhood programs, gather

demographics, and raise awareness of the need for an early childhood initiative to better serve the preschool age children in the community.

There are other events and traditions near and dear to the residents of Steeltown, such as the Steeltown Tiger football season, the high school promenade, and other Steeltown community events that draw large numbers of local residents. These events would be avenues to expand the communication system with regards to quality early childhood care that currently eludes the parents/primary caregivers in and around the housing projects of the Steeltown community.

Utilizing these events has the potential to increase attendance and participation in established meetings, advocacy groups, literacy nights, partnerships with businesses and education consortiums, and transition teams of early childcare providers and SASD personnel. But these represent the building blocks and not the foundation of an effective communication system. Once the foundation is strong, then the building blocks could stand strong as well, and an effective communication system could be established and utilized.

Building collaborative partnerships to establish an effective communication system does not need to be limited to educators and community business leaders. It could move beyond these usual suspects. Collaborative partnerships across the nation are moving beyond the usual suspects as allies (Bruner, 2004a) to promote an early childhood agenda that improves school readiness and includes these partnerships in the local economic development strategies for longitudinal impact. Law enforcement agencies, the district attorney's office, economic development and redevelopment planners represent those stakeholders who are joining forces with early childhood care providers across the nation. A recommendation for future practice would be to engage these stakeholders in joining with the educational and community activists

and embark into new partnerships that would place an early childhood initiative at the forefront of the Steeltown community.

The study has demonstrated the enormous difference in the perceptions and understanding of quality early childhood education and care between early childhood care educators and the parents/primary caregivers of preschool age children in and around the Steeltown housing projects.

This research study has been a humbling experience in that it never occurred to me that the communication system that effectively serves me is not one that meets the needs of the children and families in and around the neighborhoods of the housing projects in the Steeltown community. It challenges me, as an educator and advocate of early childhood education, to reexamine the methods with which I communicate with the parents/primary caregivers of preschool age and school age children in my care, and undertake the role of changing its non-existent status in and around the housing projects. Many of the preschool age children in and around the housing projects in the Steeltown community begin kindergarten far behind the starting line for school readiness and future academic achievement. The research has demonstrated that quality PreK has the potential to place all children at the starting line of the race for academic success. The race is well underway. Each preschool age child in the Steeltown community and across the nation should be afforded the opportunity to place his/her foot at the starting line for future academic achievement and success.

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**APPENDIX - MISCELLANEOUS LETTERS OF APPROVAL
AND CONSENT**

**Letter of Consent to Use Facility
For Research Study**

March 2006

123 ABC Street
XYZ, PA 12345

Dear Ms. Lobaugh,

The XXXXXXXXXXXXX gives consent to utilize the XXXXXXXX in your study on early childhood education programs so as to conduct focus groups and interviews.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

**Letter of Consent to Use Facility
For Pilot Study**

January 2006

123 ABC Street
XYZ, PA 12345

Dear Ms. Lobaugh,

The Steeltown Area School District gives consent for you to utilize Any Boro School as the site to complete the focus group pilot study for your doctoral dissertation on early childhood education programs.

Sincerely,

Dr. XXXX XXXXX
Assistant Superintendent
Steeltown Area School District

Letter Requesting Use of Facility

123 ABC Street
XYZ, PA 12345
January 2006

XXXXXX Outreach Program
GHI Street
XYZ, PA 12345

Dear Ms. XXXX,

My name is Catherine Lobaugh, Principal of Any Boro Elementary School in the Steeltown Area School District. I am working on my doctoral dissertation at the University of Pittsburgh. My topic is exploring the reasons some parents choose or do not choose to have their preschool age children participate in early childhood education programs.

My study will involve focus groups and face to face interviews. I am writing to request the use of XXX Outreach Facility at XXXXX Village and YYYYYY Village to conduct the focus groups and interviews. The focus group will involve meeting as a group of parents at each of these facilities. The face to face interviews will be conducted on an individual basis at these facilities as well. I would like to conduct the focus groups and the interviews at XXXXX Village and YYYYYY Village Recreation Center for the convenience of the participants. It will take approximately 60 minutes of their time.

No participant will be identified in the study. Total anonymity of the participants will be honored in the final dissertation. I am petitioning the project review board to have my study approved. Your organization's participation would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions I can be reached at 123-456-7890.

Thank you,

Catherine Lobaugh

Flyer to be posted

To: PARENTS and PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF
PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

From: Catherine Lobaugh

**A research project will be
CONDUCTED BY CATHERINE LOBAUGH**

PRINCIPAL OF ANY BORO SCHOOL IN
THE STEELTOWN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

REASON:

CONDUCTING RESEARCH FOR A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH TO IDENTIFY THE REASONS PARENTS CHOOSE OR NOT CHOOSE TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

PURPOSE:

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS WILL BE USED TO EXAMINE THE REASONS PARENTS AND PRIMARY CHILDCAREGIVERS CHOOSE TO ENROLL OR NOT ENROLL THEIR CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN THE STEELTOWN AREA

WHERE:

THE FOCUS GROUPS WILL MEET ONE TIME EACH AT EITHER XXXXXX VILLAGE OR YYYYYYY VILLAGE RECREATION CENTERS. The focus group will take approximately 30 minutes.

THE INTERVIEWS WILL BE HELD WITH EACH PARTICIPANT AT A FUTURE DATE (SCHEDULED AFTER THE FOCUS GROUPS). THE INTERVIEWS WILL BE CONDUCTED ON A ONE TO ONE BASIS BETWEEN C.LOBAUGH AND THE PARENT/PRIMARY CAREGIVER. THE INTERVIEWS WILL BE HELD AT EITHER XXXXXX VILLAGE OR YYYYYYY VILLAGE RECREATION CENTERS OR ANY BORO SCHOOL.

The interviews will take approximately 30 minutes each

For more information
Please see the recreational coordinators at
XXXXX Village or YYYYY Village
Or contact Catherine Lobaugh at 123-456-7890