**Project:** **Ideal Learning Head Start Expansion.**

Ideal Learning Environments encourage a holistic approach to education whose principles are focused on children’s construction of their own learning, play, the teacher as a guide, relationships, personalized instruction, environment as facilitators of exploration, freedom, and children-led learning. (Trust for Learning, n.d)

What are Ideal Learning Environments?

**Funder: Trust for Learning**

**SREE Fellow: Yohimar Sivira-Gonzalez, University of Louisville.**

***Overview***

This research project focuses on collaborating with Trust for Learning to design a research study to assess alignment between Head Start grantees’ traditional curricular approaches (ex. implementation of Creative Curriculum) and key features of Ideal Learning Environments. Over the years, Trust for Learning has invested resources in implementing and researching ideal learning environments such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, HighScope, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street, Friends Center for Children, All Our Kin, EL Education, AVANCE, Educare, and others. At the same time, Head Start programs have their own expectations and regulations guided by the funder. Thus, the purpose of this review is to investigate the alignment in curriculum principles and practices between Head Start and Ideal Learning environments to better inform educators’, stakeholders’ and funders’ support and implementation of regulations.

***Guiding Questions***

This review aims to answer the following questions to achieve those goals.

* What are the principles of the curricular models endorsed by Ideal Learning Environments?
* How does ideal learning environment curricular models align with Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework?
* What are the barriers to implementing a progressive curricular approach – and Ideal Learning Environment – within the highly regulated context of Head Start?
* Few studies described the curricular approaches endorsed by Ideal Learning Environments in terms of classroom practices, teachers’ roles, students’ roles, and materials.

Key Findings

* A few research studies explore the connection and alignment of Head Start and Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Waldorf and High Scope finding that alignment and misalignment usually involves the selection of materials, the principles of learning adopted and how each curricular model embraces the concept of learning in language and literacy, relationship with adults in socio-emotional domain and cognition domains.
* The curricular misalignment of HS and Ideal Learning Environments might represent barriers to implementation in terms of structuring learning activities, teachers’ training, and parental involvement.
* While High Scope and Tools of the minds are the most aligned with Head Start standards, the prescriptive nature of the approaches might represent a barrier of implementation for teachers without the corresponding training.

Recommendations for Future Research

* Most of the studies documented in this study have examined the different curriculum models in isolation. More exploratory, experiential research is needed to compare how the curriculum models endorsed by Ideal Learning Environments can be implemented and aligned with Head Start Frameworks.
* I suggest conducting a program evaluation that follows a responsive approach to evaluation of programs (Russ-Eft (2009). A responsive approach to the evaluation of Ideal Learning Environments from different sources, primary and secondary stakeholders including talking to teachers, program staff, and other audiences to identify each program’s scope and activities and discover individuals’ concerns. This program evaluation can be done by developing small case studies through qualitative data collection strategies such as interviews and observations or large-scale quantitative instruments. As Head Start standards as somewhat difficult to operationalize, Trust for Learning may provide a scaffolded version of learning outcomes and standards that grantees can easily follow to assess their own outcomes and whether they are following the guidelines and requirements.
* A need analysis at the beginning and in the middle of partnerships to identify weaknesses and desires of the stakeholders. This can be done with the purpose of rethinking the goals based on the real conditions of each community partner staff. Thus, teachers, administrators and parents may feel part of the process. Intensifying their sense of belonging can lead to a more culturally responsive practice.
* Given the need for more quantitative and mixed methods research, Emerson, and Linder (2021) propose a framework to research one curriculum used in ideal learning environments – Reggio Emilia – (see figure 1). With a more holistic approach to research, Emerson, and Linder (2021) suggest the implementation of research studies that deepen teachers' experiences, adaptability, cultural appropriation, and community instead of differential scores.