

Abstract Title Page

Title: Synthesizing and Presenting the (Very Limited) Evidence Base for Early Childhood Curricula to Practitioners

Authors and Affiliations:

Jennifer DiBara Crandell, Ed.D.
National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning
WestEd
jcrande@wested.org

Osnat Zur, Ph.D.
National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning
WestEd
ozur@wested.org

Jennifer Marcella-Burdett, Ph.D.
National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning
WestEd
jmarcel@wested.org

Abstract Body

Background:

Many publicly-funded early childhood programs are mandated to use comprehensive curricula to promote children's school readiness in multiple domains (e.g., by QRIS, Head Start Program Performance Standards, etc.). Practitioners need accessible information about the evidence base of curricula they may adopt. While *What Works Clearinghouse* reviews the evidence for selected preschool curricula and the *Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness* reviews evidence for selected home visiting programs, there is no review of the evidence for infant and toddler curricula. Furthermore, these resources may not provide information on the most popular curricula, do not use a common set of criteria across curriculum types, and are not designed for early childhood practitioners. The revised Office of Head Start's Curriculum Consumer Report provides an analysis of available evidence on curriculum effectiveness for the most widely used preschool, infant and toddler, and home-visiting curricula to inform practitioners' curriculum selection.

Purpose:

This study presents an analysis of available evidence from cause-and-effect and other studies on the effectiveness of different types of early childhood curricula, using a common set of evaluation criteria. The analysis includes evidence related to child outcomes in multiple domains. In addition, it provides a tool for communicating to practitioners about research in ways that are accessible and can inform decisions about curriculum adoption.

Methodology:

This analysis synthesized relevant studies on the effectiveness of specific early childhood curricula, analyzed the findings using a rubric, and presented a brief narrative description of the evidence base for each curriculum.

Included studies met the following criteria:

1. Evaluated a curriculum commonly used by Head Start/Early Head Start programs
2. Reported child outcomes in one or more school readiness domains
3. Analyzed and published independently of the publisher
4. Published within the last ten years
5. Included primary data analysis, with the curriculum in the experimental condition

Literature Search Procedure

A literature search was conducted using each curriculum's name as a search term. Electronic searches were made of academic databases (e.g., EBSCO, Academic Search). In addition, Google Scholar, Early Childhood Research Connections, *What Works Clearinghouse*, and publisher websites were searched.

Rubric

The evidence was evaluated on a rubric that considered a.) the rigor of the research design, and b.) the number, strength, consistency and breadth of positive child outcomes. A “full evidence” rating required experimental studies to find evidence of strong child outcomes in more than one domain.

Summary Review

For each curriculum, we created a narrative description of the studies that contributed to the evidence base. In addition to positive child outcomes, summaries addressed:

- **Research design:** What type of research design was used?
- **Sample and generalizability:** What samples were included? Were the samples representative of diverse children and families (e.g., race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status)?
- **Fidelity of implementation:** What training was provided? What was the fidelity of implementation?

Findings:

Few curricula were associated with positive child outcomes. Seventeen of the 24 curricula had a “no evidence” rating. None of the six infant and toddler curricula had published studies available on the curriculum’s effectiveness. Five preschool curricula and two home visiting curricula had some empirical evidence for their effectiveness. No curriculum had a “full evidence” rating.

These findings reflect the paucity of available studies on the effectiveness of comprehensive preschool, infant and toddler, and home visiting curricula to support school readiness. Three preschool curricula were evaluated experimentally as part of the Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research (PCER) Consortium. One other preschool curriculum was evaluated by an experimental curriculum evaluation. Another preschool curriculum was evaluated as part of quasi-experimental program evaluations. One home visiting curriculum was evaluated through an experimental study, while another was included in descriptive local program evaluations.

The narrative reviews of the evidence for each curriculum were intended to be accessible to readers who may lack training in research or evaluation. The sample and implementation data provided context for understanding who benefited from the curriculum and the types of supports that were used to achieve the outcomes. The descriptions of child outcomes included information about inconsistencies in the outcomes (e.g., present for some ages and income levels, or in some domains or assessments, but not others), as well as basic information about research design (e.g., whether outcomes were pre-post or compared to a control group).

Conclusions:

This analysis finds that, across curriculum types, the evidence for the effectiveness of comprehensive early child curricula to support school readiness is lacking. In particular, the infant and toddler curricula have not been evaluated empirically, as suggested in previous work (Grosso, Jones, Paulsell, & Monahan, 2015). Some preschool and home visiting curricula have an evidence base, but none received a “full evidence” rating. The evidence base is lacking in part because there are few experimental curriculum evaluations. In addition, some evidence suggests

that domain-specific curricula may be more effective than the comprehensive curricula reviewed here (e.g., Jenkins, Duncan, Auger, Bitler, Domina, & Burchinal, 2018).

In the absence of experimental studies, program evaluations are one additional source of information about a curriculum's effectiveness. However, interpreting their findings can be challenging for practitioners. The findings are not generalizable, and the studies evaluate a curriculum as part of a larger program that may include additional curriculum materials, extensive training or coaching, or other supports not typically associated with the implementation of the curriculum. Interpreting evidence across multiple types of studies and child outcomes is complex.

The field must continue to evaluate early childhood curricula using rigorous methods, since these curricula are widely used and often mandated. In the meantime, we must provide early childhood professionals who make decisions about curriculum adoption, especially those without specific training on research and evaluation, with clear and accessible information about how to interpret the quite limited evidence base behind early childhood curricula. Early childhood practitioners deserve support for how to choose a high-quality, evidence-based curriculum that fits their program and the children and families they serve.

Bibliography:

Del Grosso, P., Jones, C., Paulsell, D., & Monahan, S. (2015). *Learning About Infant/toddler Early Education Services (LITES): Summarizing the research and gaps on compelling models*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

Jenkins, J. M., Duncan, G. J., Auger, A., Bitler, M., Domina, T., & Burchinal, M. (2018). Boosting School Readiness: Should Preschool Teachers Target Skills or the Whole Child?. *Economics of Education Review*.

National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. (2014). *Preschool curriculum consumer report*. Washington, DC: Office of Head Start.

Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Consortium (2008). *Effects of Preschool Curriculum Programs on School Readiness* (NCER 2008–2009). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Research. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Sama-Miller, E., Akers, L. Mraz-Esposito, A., Zukiewicz, M., Avellar, S., Paulsell, D., and Del Grosso, P. (2017). *Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness Review: Executive Summary*. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, *What Works Clearinghouse*.