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2013

Abstract

Underachievement in Primary Grade Students: A Review of Kindergarten Enrollment
and DIBELS Scores

by

Shawnik Marie Rice

MA, Eastern University, 2002

BA, Eastern University, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning

Walden University

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Abstract

Student underachievement in kindergarten through Grade 3 continues to be a challenge in the Philadelphia School District. The purpose of this quantitative descriptive correlation study was to examine, using record archives from one Philadelphia school, whether there is a relationship between (a) reading achievement scores for the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test in 3rd grade and kindergarten attendance, (b) gender and students' scores in kindergarten and 3rd grade, (c) kindergarten teacher attendance and kindergarten students' scores in 3rd grade, and (d) parental involvement in kindergarten and kindergarten students' scores in 3rd grade. Due to federal achievement mandates, the study contains a review and critique of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The learning theories of Piaget and Vygotsky were used to support the importance of primary education. DIBELS reading scores for 3rd grade students were used in the study to compare those who enrolled in public kindergarten ($n = 120$) and those who did not enroll in public kindergarten ($n = 77$). The results from the multifactor analysis of variance showed that 3rd grade reading achievement was not significantly higher for students who enrolled in kindergarten. There were no significant relationships between scores and teacher attendance and parental involvement in kindergarten; however, reading achievement was significantly different between male and female 3rd graders ($n = 197$) in the total sample. This study has implications for constructive social change in that school administrators who read the findings may make more informed decisions about student access to early intervention programs and progress monitoring assessments to increase reading development.

PREVIEW

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research study to my mother, Clarease, who was my first teacher. Clarease began her career as a preschool teacher; in this role, she impacted the lives of many children and families residing in the West Philadelphia area. She has since been a role model, mentor, and constant source of support to me. I would also like to thank Maude Atwell for challenging me to become an advocate for early childhood education.

PREVIEW

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Claudia Curry for her knowledge, wisdom, and support during the research phase of my doctoral study. I would also like to thank Dr. Mary Hallums, who has provided insight on the research process and encouragement throughout my doctoral study. Lastly, I would like to extend appreciation to my family and friends, who have been a relentless source of support and encouragement throughout this journey. I appreciate the support and guidance from all of you because I would not have been able to achieve this accomplishment without you.

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PREVIEW

Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Underachievement in primary students is an absorbing issue facing public schools. The links between underachievement and kindergarten enrollment, teacher attendance, and parental involvement have been explored and thoroughly examined (Reid, 2008). For example, Reid (2008) reported that student nonattendance may lead to future barriers of boredom in school, thoughts of feeling unsafe, perceptions on subject relevance, and a lack of support with literacy and numeracy deficiencies. Moreover, it is not surprising that staggering levels of kindergarten nonattendance have been correlated with increased dropout rates, widened unemployment gaps, welfare dependency, and incarceration (Wilkins, 2008). In Wilkins (2008), the testimonies of four students were used to measure how school characteristics influenced student achievement. Findings indicated that school characteristics such as teacher attendance, violence, perceptually unsafe environments, and unfairly enforced discipline policies negatively impacted students' motivation and ability to advance academically. In light of the social, economic, and educational impact of teacher attendance and parental involvement on public school primary students, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has been implemented to attempt to decrease causes of student underachievement (Chapman, 2007).

The NCLB Act (2001) documents the standards of American education, in which federal jurisdiction manages state policy that regulates student achievement standards in local schools and determines teacher qualifications and instructional roles (Chapman, 2007; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). The primary goal of NCLB is to have 95% to 100% of

public school students attain levels of proficiency or above in reading, math, and science by 2014 (Chapman, 2007; Rashid & Johnson, 2011). The law unequivocally demands an assessment system that provides equal opportunity for student success without excuses. Therefore, every student is placed on a single academic track to achieve proficiency while all students move at the same pace to ensure that no child is left behind. Poor-performing schools are identified as not making adequate yearly progress (AYP); thus, districts provide supports in data and budget analysis, as well as instructional strategies to sustain statewide support (Finnigan, Bitter, & O'Day, 2009). The glaring concern with these reforms is the emergence of a national curriculum that dismisses the relevance of literacy deficiencies in primary students and gender differences in learning.

In a recent study, Smith (2010) reported that there is a difference in how boys and girls learn. The researcher indicated that girls are outperforming boys in literacy-based subjects, suggesting the existence of a number of challenges to teaching and learning in public school classrooms. Even so, the ongoing achievement gap between girls and boys clearly demonstrates that female and male public school students are learning at dissimilar paces and encountering different academic experiences. Evidence for gender differences in primary students' learning modalities challenges the NCLB law, which presents an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning through an implied gender-neutral curriculum.

In this study, I examine the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) reading achievement scores of primary students who were enrolled in kindergarten through third grade at an elementary school located in South Philadelphia

during the 2010-2011 school year. *Urban Elementary School* (UES) is used as a pseudonym for the name of the school in this study. My findings indicate that a heterogeneous group of students underachieve for reasons ranging from school nonattendance to curriculum-based instructional discipline models (Smith, 2010). The development of teacher and parent accountability for primary student reading achievement is essential, as it provides a support system for students, in addition to providing teachers and parents with opportunities to trust and to build layers of confidence in one another's potential to lead (Payne, 2008). My findings also indicate the need for modifications to the current attendance policy and teacher professional development in order for Philadelphia School District officials, school administrators, and teachers to increase student reading achievement.

Background of the Study

In 2001, the NCLB Act introduced a new way of radically increasing student achievement in U.S. public schools. Since enactment, the law has presented a philosophy of education based on high-stakes testing and skill-based teaching in an effort to obtain equality in student achievement results. By providing educational resources to children and their families, proposed changes were designed to increase student achievement in reading, math, and science by 2014 (Chapman, 2007; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). What this means on a practical level is that public schools must focus on attaining standards of achievement to make adequate yearly progress. It has been a big challenge for schools to meet such demanding requirements. In a recent study, Chapman (2007) cited several fundamental flaws in the NCLB Act and concluded the following: (a) NCLB's goal of

95% to 100% proficiency by 2014 is unattainable; (b) proposals to modify AYP, such as modifying group sizes and descriptions of value-added models, cannot resolve the underlying problems and may exacerbate inaccuracies in reporting; (c) the demands of reporting associated with AYP are underfunded; (d) the programs funded by NCLB do not offset the impact of poverty on the achievement of students; and (e) NCLB functions in a manner that disproportionately penalizes schools attended by the neediest children (p. 27). In sum, this journey to universal proficiency has presented some challenges due to unnoted indicators to student underachievement or low achievement such as truancy, differentiated instruction, and home and school partnerships to maximize provisions for increasing student achievement. However, the mission for American public schools calls for proficiency in academic achievement.

The School District of Philadelphia's mission and vision for public school educational programs is to be a racially and ethnically diverse community committed to education. It aims to provide a high-quality education that prepares and empowers all students to achieve their full intellectual and social potential in order to become lifelong learners and productive members of society (The School District of Philadelphia, 2010). This focus on high-quality education and student achievement is a prime concern for Philadelphia school administrators.

UES has attempted to reconstruct the landscape in public educational programs for school-age students residing in the School District of Philadelphia servicing region. UES is a public school that services students from kindergarten to seventh grade. The learning community consists of a principal, three school administrators, a fiscal program

manager, a school counselor, a school nurse, 30 teachers, and six assistant teachers. The total enrollment for UES is 833 students per day, while the average attendance rate is currently at 91.8%. In comparison, the total enrollment for the region is 14,958, and for the district the rate is 159,304. The ideal attendance target rate is at 100%. In 2010, the UES student attendance rate target was 91.8%; however, the actual attendance indicated a 1.1% variance. In contrast, the targeted percentage of students chronically absent was 8.0%; UES met this target with a 0.1% variance below target (School District of Philadelphia, 2010).

In 2010, UES met its Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) target in reading proficiency of 64.4%. In PSSA below basic reading proficiency, UES met its target of 27.2% at 22.4%. UES student achievement indicators reflect an progressive stride towards NCLB's goal of 95% to 100% proficiency by 2014 (Chapman 2007; The School District of Philadelphia, 2010).

While UES statistical data reflect an upward slope toward academic achievement, without the continued support of legislation for intervention needs, underachievement remains a threat to America's students. Smith (2010) concluded that recent United Kingdom (UK) Government policy has a strong focus on raising academic standards and eliminating all forms of underachievement through high-stakes testing, attendance, and teacher quality and that as a result, the nation has a system of national testing and target setting that is on an unprecedented scale (p. 38). These results are reasons for continued commitment to decreasing underachievement among primary students in kindergarten

through Grade 3 through enhanced kindergarten teacher quality in work attendance and parent involvement.

Problem Statement

The underachievement of primary students in UES has brought attention to possible risk factors for student achievement in kindergarten and third grade students. UES archive records indicates a significant decrease in enrollment in kindergarten as compared to student enrollment in third grade. In context, Philadelphia Public Schools have undergone a widened achievement gap due to reasons linked to kindergarten enrollment, teacher attendance, and parent involvement (Francisa et al., 2008; Stillman, 2009; Wilkins, 2008). Low test scores on skill-based, standardized examinations are often equated with student nonattendance, failure, or underachievement while other claims emphasize teacher insufficiencies that may be caused by gaps in teacher attendance in the primary classroom (Smith, 2010). Other researchers indicate several indicators for student underachievers such as school nonattendance, a lack of professional training for teachers in teaching marginalized groups, and parent engagement (Chapman, 2007; Francisa et al., 2008; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011; Smith, 2010; Stillman, 2009; Wilkins, 2008).

Within this context of national crisis, kindergarten nonattendance in public schools has given rise to growing inequities across learning communities as well as the commencement of educational policy for subsequent primary grades, such as truancy prevention programs (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Evidence of student truancy in primary grades as it relates to achievement is tabulated on public schools' attendance statistic

reports along with reasons for kindergarten nonattendance (Larson, Zuel, & Swanson, 2011; Wilkins, 2008). Despite the reasons for kindergarten nonattendance, the fact remains that when a student is absent from school, he or she runs the risk of decreased academic attainment (Redmond & Hosp, 2008).

The quality of teachers in work attendance and their preparedness to serve a diverse student population have wide implications for standardization and educational intervention for teachers concerning the importance of classroom attendance and how teacher quality promotes equity-minded teaching that leads to increases in student achievement (Stillman, 2009). A recent study on NCLB administration and national trends in education documented a disparity in per-pupil funding between affluent and poor districts since 2000 (Chapman, 2007). Historically, such disparities involved redlining, refusing someone resources because he or she lived in an area considered a poor financial risk. Communities that were deemed undeserving of investment thus became subject to economic, social, and racial segregation (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). In sum, primary student underachievement warrants a reauthorization of the NCLB law and how school officials determine the causes of student underachievement in primary students in kindergarten through third grade.

Another consideration for primary student underachievement is the understanding of teacher quality as determined by differentiated instruction to address gender differences in primary students and how diverse learning modalities impact student reading achievement (Greig & Hughes, 2009). A recent study on boys' underachievement in school and the misconception that poetry is an unsuitable genre for boys documented

the existence of enforced gender polarization in literacy practices in the classroom and the need for educators to engage equitable instructional practices for boys and girls (Greig & Hughes, 2009). Other investigations of gender-differentiated instruction have considered the correlation between student gender, school attendance, and the cultural environment of students and academic achievement to form a contextual framework of causes for student underachievement (Konstantopoulos, 2009).

Commentators have launched many campaigns skirting the perimeters of culture, environmental barriers, socioeconomic status, parental involvement, school policy, social policy, and student achievement (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Phillips & Loch, 2011; Yang-Hansen, 2008). Traditional education models hinged on the tapering perception of academic immersion or programming to achieve success in the global economy; this model has been challenged with contemporary threads of research-based, scientifically proven tests that target the acquisition of core subjects in academic instruction (Rashid & Johnson, 2011). Evidence of this is demonstrated in the low test scores of primary students who attend schools in the Philadelphia School District, especially those from low-income families (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008).

Such student achievement measures indicate that there may be a missing link between home and school (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008). When there are more parents involved in basic obligations at home, communication from the school to the home, assistance at the school, and assistance in learning activities at home, research has indicated that students are less resistant to academic instruction and school achievement requirements (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008; Epstein, 1986). This study focused on parent attendance in parent

and teachers' conferences. Epstein (1986) indicated that parent involvement requires some investment of teachers to fulfill the goal of learning activities in school and at home. Because this small-steps-to-change process has not yet reached maturation, the camaraderie between school policy makers, administrators, teachers, and parents has not yet ensured effective and efficient collaboration for all stakeholders to increase the probability of student achievement (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008).

The challenge of kindergarten enrollment and teacher attendance for primary students impacts the Philadelphia School District because student underachievement persists in primary students (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). Other possible factors contributing to primary reading achievement are the variables of teacher quality in gender-differentiated instruction, culture, environmental barriers, and parental involvement, as well as socioeconomic status, school policy, social policy, and student achievement. This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by seeking to draw a correlation between primary students' reading achievement and kindergarten enrollment, teacher attendance, and parent involvement in the learning community of primary students in kindergarten through third grade.

Nature of the Study

A quantitative descriptive correlational design was used for this study. This inquiry was chosen due to the use of existing descriptive data and analysis to correlate variables linked to this problem (Cozby, 2001; Singleton & Straits, 2005). Singleton and Straits (2005) noted that inquiries were intended for testing relationships.

In this research study, I examined the reading achievement of primary students in kindergarten and third grade who attended UES during the 2007-2008 and 2010-2011 school years in relation to DIBELS scores, kindergarten teacher attendance, parental involvement and gender differences. I focused on data collection and analysis to discuss results with school district officials, school administrators, and teachers to decrease reading underachievement in primary students in kindergarten through third grade and to encourage kindergarten enrollment, parental involvement, and teacher quality programs to support attendance requirements.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In monitoring compliance, the NCLB law has had an adverse impact on public schools in urban districts, where students represent minority groups who are living in poverty and are not fluent in English (Chapman, 2007). The focus of primary school administrators is to ensure that students are adequately prepared to demonstrate proficiency in language and literacy skills on the DIBELS test. In current studies, researchers indicate that other factors must be considered when analyzing skill-based test scores (Chapman, 2007; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). In this study, the DIBELS scores of primary students in third grade were analyzed with records of school enrollment and academic achievement in reading. The following research questions were used to guide this study.

1. Is there a difference in reading achievement on DIBELS tests between third grade students who attended kindergarten and third grade students who did not attend kindergarten?