



CAS 2012 Research Brief #5

Curricular Approaches among Child Care Center Directors in Chicago West and North Side ZIP Codes

Rachel A. Gordon, Anna Colaner, Danny Lambouths III, and Maria Krysan
May 28, 2013

Introduction

The 2012 Chicago Area Study surveyed 229 center directors in 33 ZIP Codes on the West and North sides of Chicago. All centers and preschools that served three and four year olds in these ZIP Codes were eligible, except those located in the public schools. Eligible settings included preschools in churches, private schools, and community organizations as well as preschool programs and full-day care in standalone child care centers. Fully 70% of eligible directors participated in the study. For simplicity we refer to all participants as “centers.”

We prepared a set of initial research briefs to disseminate basic study findings. Each of these briefs describes a set of data collected in the survey for the sample as a whole and across five types of ZIP Codes. The five ZIP Code types allow us to provide a basic portrait of differences in center characteristics depending on the race-ethnicity and income of the community. The five types of ZIP Codes are: (1) mixed race, low income, (2) majority non-Hispanic Black, low income, (3) majority Hispanic, low income, (4) majority non-Hispanic White, middle income, and (5) majority non-Hispanic White, high income. The cutoffs between low/middle and between middle/high income are \$48,500 and \$70,000 respectively (about two and three times the federal poverty line for a family of four in 2011). We define a location as being a majority of one race-ethnicity if the ZIP Code is comprised of at least 50% of that racial/ethnic group (see CAS 2012 Research Brief #1 for additional details).

This CAS 2012 Research Brief #5 summarizes directors’ responses to questions about their use of child-centered and teacher-directed approaches to learning, their engagement in specific reading and math activities, and their use of particular curricula.

Preschool Curricula

Creative Curriculum: Offers numerous supports (such as daily practice resources) to help teachers individualize learning and document children’s developmental progress. Aligned with many state and federal program standards.

High/Scope: Emphasizes a constructivist approach, meaning that learning occurs through physical and mental interactions with the environment and with other children and adults. Emerged from the Perry Preschool Project, and includes specific periods of small group activities, large group activities, and independent play in learning centers throughout the day.

Montessori: Emphasizes student choice from a set of materials/options designed to help children learn; and, learning through discovery, in uninterrupted periods of directly engaging with materials, rather than direct instruction.

Reggio Emilia: Emphasizes a child-focused approach in which children explore and discover in a supportive and enriching environment. Includes co-construction, which emphasizes the social aspects of learning in which children construct knowledge with peers and adults.

Bank Street: Emphasizes a balance of child and adult initiated activities, with teachers acting as facilitators of learning and offering numerous open-ended materials in the classroom.

The tables at the end of this document present means and proportions for the variables. Tables of supplementary information, including statistical tests, are available from the study investigators. Here we highlight some of the major results.

Use of Child-Initiated and Direct Instructional Approaches

Most directors reported that their preschool classrooms highly emphasized child-initiated activities (78% reported that they did so “very much” and an additional 17% said that they did so “somewhat”). In contrast, direct instruction varied across settings, with directors evenly split across those who said that they emphasized direct instruction “a little,” “somewhat,” and “very much” (about a third each).

Although child-initiated approaches were common across ZIP Codes, directors in low-income, majority Black areas reported somewhat less emphasis (69% “very much”) and directors in middle-income, majority White areas somewhat more emphasis (86% “very much”) on this approach. Varying levels of direct instruction were also evident across ZIP Codes, although directors in majority White, middle- and high-income areas reported somewhat less of an emphasis on this approach (41 and 43% just “a little” in contrast to low income areas with 22-31% “a little”).

Curricular Approaches

Creative Curriculum was the most common curriculum, being used in the majority of centers (80%). Next most common were Reggio Emilia and Montessori, reported by about one-fifth and one-quarter of centers. The High/Scope and Bank Street curricula were less common (12% and 5% respectively), and fully one-quarter of center directors reported using other curricula (mostly curricula they had developed themselves, sometimes drawing from various published curricula).

Across ZIP Codes, use of Creative Curriculum was particularly prevalent within low-income, majority Black areas, where fully 97% of centers used it. Directors in these areas were also least likely to report using other curricula. In contrast, directors in low-income areas that were of mixed race or majority Hispanic, were somewhat less likely to report Creative Curriculum (87-89%) and more likely to report other approaches, especially Reggio Emilia (19-34%). Directors in the majority White, middle- and high-income ZIP Codes were least likely to report using Creative Curriculum (75% and 62% respectively) and most likely to use Montessori (24% and 34% respectively). Reggio Emilia was also prevalent in these majority White areas, especially the high-income ZIP codes (where 43% reported using the Reggio Emilia curriculum).

Reading and Math Activities

Reading and math activities occurred frequently in most centers. Directors reported about the frequency of activities on a four point scale: “1” represented “less than weekly,” “2” represented “about once a week,” “3” represented “several times a week,” and “4” represented “every day.” We asked about five different reading activities (learning alphabet letters, writing alphabet letters, working on phonics, learning rhyming words, learning print conventions) and five different math activities (counting out loud, counting objects, playing math games, working with measuring instruments, doing calendar activities, and telling time).

We averaged the director reports across these activities, as well as looking at each activity on its own. The centers averaged somewhat more than “several times a week” across the activities, with reading activities slightly more frequent than math. Across ZIP Codes, centers in majority White, high-income areas placed somewhat less emphasis on reading and math activities, and centers in majority Black, low-income areas also placed somewhat less emphasis on math activities, although the average remained at least “several times a week” even in these areas.

Learning letters of the alphabet was the most common reading activity, occurring daily in nearly three-quarters of centers. Learning about rhyming words was least common, happening daily in just one-third of centers. The somewhat lesser emphasis on reading in the majority White, high-income areas was evident across these individual activities, where just over half reported daily learning of letters and about one-quarter daily attention to rhyming words.

Regarding math, counting out loud was most common, occurring daily in almost 80% of centers. Working with rulers, measuring cups, spoons, and other measuring instruments was least common, happening daily in just 25% of centers. The greatest differences across ZIP Codes were seen for calendar-related activities, telling time, and playing math-related games. Calendar activities happened daily in just 57% of majority Black, low-income ZIP Codes and in 58% of majority White, high-income ZIP Codes, in contrast to 72-89% of other ZIP Codes. Telling time and playing math-related games were also relatively uncommon in majority Black, low-income areas (17% and 37% daily, respectively) relative to other areas (28-39% and 44-57% daily, respectively).

Summary

This research brief provides a descriptive portrait of the curricular approaches used in preschool classrooms across Chicago’s West and North sides. Several important findings emerge, which we will examine further in future reports.

One clear result is that the traditional emphasis in the early childhood field on child-initiated learning remains common in the West and North sides of Chicago, with over three-quarters of directors reporting this was “very much” the case in their programs. Direct instruction showed greater variation across settings, with about one-third each reporting little, some and very much of an emphasis on this approach. This result suggests that the field’s move toward integrating child-initiated and teacher-directed instruction may not have reached all centers in the Chicago area. In other parts of our study, we talked in-depth with directors about these approaches, and we will delve into these findings in a later report.

The popularity of Creative Curriculum is also clear, with it being used in 8 out of 10 centers. This curriculum is common in publicly funded Preschool for All and Head Start classrooms, which likely explains its particularly high usage in low-income ZIP Codes. Strikingly, nearly every center located in majority Black, low-income areas used Creative Curriculum, and few used any other curricular approaches. In contrast, centers located in majority White, high-income areas were least likely to use Creative Curriculum, and most likely to follow the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches. Interestingly, center directors in both of these areas (low-income, majority Black and high-income, majority White) reported the lowest frequency of math activities, and reading activities were also least common in high-income, majority White areas. Whereas in the most affluent areas such activities may be less needed, to the extent that children have already learned these skills at home, their relative absence in the poorest areas may limit preschools’ ability to narrow school readiness gaps. Again, our future work will examine this issue in greater depth.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Curricula of Centers and Directors in the CAS 2012

	Sample Size	Overall Mean/Percentage	SD	Means/Percentages within Types of ZIP Codes				
				Mixed Race Low Income	Majority Black Low Income	Majority Hispanic Low Income	Majority White Middle Income	Majority White High Income
To what extent would you say that your preschool classrooms emphasize child-initiated activities?								
Not at all	229	0%		0%	0%	2%	0%	0%
A little	229	4%		3%	3%	6%	6%	2%
Somewhat	229	17%		19%	29%	13%	8%	23%
Very much	229	78%		78%	69%	80%	86%	75%
To what extent would you say that your preschool classrooms emphasize direct instruction?								
Not at all	229	2%		3%	0%	2%	2%	2%
A little	229	33%		31%	26%	22%	41%	43%
Somewhat	229	34%		31%	37%	41%	27%	32%
Very much	229	31%		36%	37%	35%	29%	23%
Do you draw on any of the following curricula in your preschool classrooms?								
Creative Curriculum	228	80%		89%	97%	87%	75%	62%
High/Scope	225	12%		14%	3%	8%	18%	13%
Montessori	229	18%		14%	9%	7%	24%	34%
Reggio Emilia	225	26%		34%	6%	19%	22%	43%
Bank Street	218	5%		12%	0%	0%	6%	6%
Other	229	25%		25%	17%	20%	33%	26%
Summary of reading and math activities (listed individually below)								
Sum of 1-4 ratings across 5 reading activities	226	3.30	0.59	3.57	3.36	3.40	3.21	3.07
Sum of 1-4 ratings across 6 math activities	227	3.16	0.57	3.25	3.01	3.23	3.21	3.07
Sum of 1-4 ratings across 11 reading/math activities	225	3.22	0.50	3.39	3.18	3.30	3.21	3.07
Would you say that preschoolers in your center do this <u>reading activity</u> less than weekly, about once a week, several times a week, or everyday?								
Work on learning letters of the alphabet.								
Less than weekly	229	3%		0%	0%	0%	6%	8%
About once a week	229	4%		0%	11%	2%	4%	6%
Several times a week	229	20%		8%	23%	15%	20%	30%
Everyday	229	73%		92%	66%	83%	71%	57%
Practice writing the letters of the alphabet.								
Less than weekly	227	5%		0%	3%	0%	10%	12%
About once a week	227	7%		3%	6%	6%	4%	13%
Several times a week	227	24%		22%	18%	24%	29%	23%
Everyday	227	64%		75%	74%	70%	57%	52%
Learn about conventions of print, for example, left to right orientation and book holding.								
Less than weekly	229	8%		6%	6%	6%	6%	15%
About once a week	229	14%		8%	11%	19%	14%	13%
Several times a week	229	22%		22%	20%	24%	27%	15%
Everyday	229	57%		64%	63%	52%	53%	57%
Work on phonics, such as "what word has a "sh" sound in it								
Less than weekly	228	7%		3%	9%	4%	12%	8%
About once a week	228	12%		6%	14%	9%	12%	19%
Several times a week	228	33%		39%	29%	37%	18%	42%
Everyday	228	48%		53%	49%	50%	59%	31%
Learn about rhyming words and word families.								
Less than weekly	228	9%		3%	11%	4%	16%	11%
About once a week	228	23%		8%	14%	28%	30%	26%
Several times a week	228	35%		39%	34%	37%	24%	40%
Everyday	228	33%		50%	40%	31%	30%	23%
Would you say that preschoolers in your center do this <u>math activity</u> less than weekly, about once a week, several times a week, or everyday?								
Count out loud.								
Less than weekly	229	0%		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
About once a week	229	3%		3%	0%	2%	0%	9%
Several times a week	229	17%		14%	23%	13%	18%	21%
Everyday	229	79%		83%	77%	85%	82%	70%
Engage in calendar-related activities.								
Less than weekly	229	9%		6%	17%	6%	4%	13%
About once a week	229	10%		6%	9%	11%	10%	11%
Several times a week	229	10%		0%	17%	11%	6%	17%
Everyday	229	71%		89%	57%	72%	80%	58%
Count objects to teach basic operations such as adding or subtracting.								
Less than weekly	228	7%		6%	11%	4%	8%	6%
About once a week	228	11%		11%	9%	11%	10%	13%
Several times a week	228	34%		34%	34%	41%	29%	30%
Everyday	228	49%		49%	46%	44%	53%	51%
Play math-related games.								
Less than weekly	229	3%		3%	3%	4%	2%	4%
About once a week	229	10%		6%	14%	6%	8%	19%
Several times a week	229	38%		39%	46%	46%	33%	30%
Everyday	229	48%		53%	37%	44%	57%	47%
Engage in activities related to telling time.								
Less than weekly	228	27%		22%	26%	15%	30%	40%
About once a week	228	18%		22%	20%	22%	12%	13%
Several times a week	228	25%		17%	37%	31%	30%	13%
Everyday	228	30%		39%	17%	31%	28%	34%
Work with rulers, measuring cups, spoons, or other measuring instruments.								
Less than weekly	229	18%		14%	31%	15%	16%	19%
About once a week	229	31%		36%	23%	30%	37%	26%
Several times a week	229	26%		25%	23%	31%	29%	21%
Everyday	229	25%		25%	23%	24%	18%	34%

Note. The ZIP Code categories are defined in CAS 2012 Brief #1. In the overall sample of 229 there are at least 35 centers within each ZIP Code category.

About the Study

The Chicago Area Study is a biennial study that collects survey data on life in the Chicago metropolitan area. Its purpose is to collect original social science data that inform policymaking and social science theory, provide hands-on methods training to students in survey research methods, and fund faculty research on pressing issues in the metro area.

The overarching goal of the 2012 Chicago Area Study was to reveal how early childhood programs were coping with the “great recession” and how this economic crisis may be widening disparities in access to early childhood programs. The study also examined four central themes: (1) disparities in access to and utilization of child care, (2) providers’ knowledge, experience, and attitudes toward state and local programs and policies, (3) providers’ knowledge of and relationships with other child care providers and other service providers in the community, and (4) how providers perceived professional definitions of child care quality and alternative cultural definitions of child care quality.

Rachel Gordon, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), was the faculty investigator for the 2012 Chicago Area Study.

Anna Colaner, Graduate Student in the UIC Department of Sociology, was the project director for the 2012 Chicago Area Study. Many additional UIC students helped design the study and collect the data.

Danny Lambouths III, Graduate Student in the UIC Department of Educational Psychology, was a participant in the Chicago Area Study course that helped to design the study and collect the data.

Maria Krysan, Professor in the Department of Sociology and Institute of Government and Public Affairs at UIC, directs the Chicago Area Study.

The UIC Survey Research Lab conducted phone interviews with center directors.

We are grateful to support from UIC, especially the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Institute of Government and Public Affairs, the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy, and the Office of Social Science Research.

We are also grateful to Illinois Action for Children for partnering with us on the study, and to the center directors who generously devoted time to participating.

Additional information is available online: <http://igpa.uillinois.edu/cas/>