

Avoiding The Opportunity

AN OU-TULSA STUDY BREAKS THROUGH YEARS OF UNCERTAINTY TO PROVE THAT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION HAS LONG-LASTING EFFECTS.

By Anna Andersen

FOR DECADES, RESEARCHERS in the field of early childhood education have known that high-quality pre-K starting at age 4 can close the “opportunity gap” for children growing up in low-resource contexts, helping them enter kindergarten with academic readiness similar to their more privileged peers. But questions remained: Does early childhood education—or ECE—starting at younger ages provide benefits as well? And do these effects last, or do they “fade out” as elementary school progresses?

Now, a groundbreaking, long-term study by the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa’s Early Childhood Education Institute in partnership with Tulsa Educare shows strong evidence that these academic advantages persist at least through the end of third grade.

“Our findings are very robust,” says Diane Horm, George Kaiser Family Foundation Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education at OU-Tulsa and founding director of its Early Childhood Education Institute. Oral comprehension, vocabulary and math skills all saw a sustained boost in children who attended Tulsa Educare. They attained scores at the national average in third grade; not only was there no “fade

out,” but students given the advantage of high-quality early care and education continued to test higher as they got older.

“What this suggests,” says Horm, “is that starting early in a high-quality program can prevent the achievement or opportunity gap from ever forming.”

The study, published in the journal *Education Sciences*, is an extension of and follow-up to a previous research collaboration between Horm at OU-Tulsa and the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, along with other researchers affiliated with the Educare network. That study followed children from four Educare schools—one of which was in Tulsa—beginning with their enrollment in the program at 19 months of age or younger until kindergarten. It compared the children’s early academic development to that of peers who did not attend Educare.

What made this study particularly significant in the field was its design; the children evaluated were randomly assigned either to Educare or “treatment as usual”—which could involve staying at home or enrollment in other early care and education programs. Researchers evaluating the young children did so without knowing their group

assignments. This “blind” randomized control trial, or RCT, is standard in medicine and other physical sciences, but is much more difficult to conduct in social sciences and education research where random assignment isn’t typical, Horm says.

The initial study proved that children assigned to Educare’s high-quality ECE program had higher language skills after one year of enrollment in Educare and at age 3, higher math skills at age 3, and fewer parent-reported problem behaviors than the control group at ages 2 and 3.

While the other three Educare sites were unable to fund continuation of the research into elementary school, Horm had hoped from the beginning to recruit financial support and participants for Tulsa’s part of the study to continue. “I knew the George Kaiser Family Foundation would be interested in longer-term results,” she says.

The ensuing partnership with GKFF allowed OU-Tulsa’s ECEI to keep studying the 75 Tulsa participants over their early elementary years.

Their collaboration yielded astonishing results: In 19 of 20 academic areas tested from kindergarten through third grade, the elementary-age children who’d been assigned to Tulsa’s Educare



JACOBI CAMPBELL

Diane Horm



OU-Tulsa's Early Childhood Education Institute team.

JACOBI CAMPBELL



OU-Tulsa's study shows that Educare's model may be the "special sauce" for long-term benefits of early childhood education.

SHANE BEVEL

as infants continued to score higher, with several significant differences emerging between the Educare treatment and control children.

“We’re really, really proud to be able to share the study’s results,” says Annie Koppel Van Hanken, chief program officer at the GKFF. “In social services, it’s very easy to become blind to the actual impact—it’s hard to remain objective,” she says. “But this study illustrates without a shadow of a doubt that there are long-term benefits to early childhood education.”

Key questions raised by the study’s results were, “What makes an early childhood education program high-quality,” and “What is Educare doing that has proved so successful?”

One important factor is what Horm calls the “dose” of the program—that is, a child’s age at enrollment, their total time of enrollment, and the intensity of the program.

While many Head Start providers are only available part-time and/or during the school year, Educare runs full-time, year-round. Tulsa Educare director Cindy Decker explains that expanded availability helps families with stability—parents have a better ability to work full-time when they’re not scrambling to make up for gaps in childcare, and that ability increases their chances of a reliable income.

“At the same time, a child has routines and is going to the same place every day,” Decker says. “Children need stability and routines to feel safe in this world.”

An additional source of routine in Tulsa Educare, she says, is that “a child who enters at 6 weeks of age would stay in the same classroom with the same teachers until they turn 3.”

Educare classrooms also have low child-teacher ratios, with three teachers for every eight children under the age of 3. “That’s the special sauce,” says Decker. “Having your needs met, having your brain stimulated, feeling safe because there are enough adults in the room to make that happen.”

Another pillar of the Educare model is family involvement. Parents are connected with an advocate, who helps with both ma-

terial needs and goal setting while allowing parents “to gain confidence that they are their child’s first teacher,” Decker says.

“The opportunities that parents have through the program changed my life,” says Rachael Stagner, whose 10-year-old daughter, Naomi, is an Educare graduate. “Educare was probably the best thing I could have done for my child.”

Stagner enrolled Naomi in Educare at 9 months of age while working an overnight job for minimum wage and putting herself through college. Even today, she and Naomi meet for lunch with the teacher from Naomi’s under-3 classroom.

Stagner also spent time as treasurer and president of Tulsa Educare’s policy council. As a council member, she traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend the National Research Conference on Early Childhood, an opportunity she says, “never would’ve happened if I’d had my child anywhere else.”

Horm, who will be retiring next year, says her own experiences studying the relationship between early childhood education and a child’s long-term success have been the highlight of a long career.

“I’m proud of the fact that we are one of the few studies that started in infancy and continued through third grade,” she says, adding that the study has been written up in professional publications like *Education Week* and *Early Learning Nation*, as well as national news outlets. Horm has also presented the study’s results to members of the Oklahoma State Legislature and Educare teachers, which Cindy Decker says “gave them trust that what they’re doing is making a difference. It reenergized them.”

Both Horm and Van Hanken believe that the study’s results will provide a vital foundation for future researchers—and for policymakers, as well.

“I think the common bond is that we all want what’s best for our kids,” Van Hanken says. “We have an enduring optimism around the potential of children, and our research shows that this optimism is fulfilled with access to high-quality care and education starting very early in life.”

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