

The Effectiveness of a Collaborative Initiative for Improving Kindergarten Enrollment

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Abstract

Kindergarten enrollment has long been believed to enhance school outcomes of elementary school students. The study evaluates the effectiveness of an informal collaborative initiative implemented in collaboration between the academic, school teachers and children families. The initiative mainly aims to improve the enrollment of neighborhood children to kindergarten by having many players, including peers, early childhood education university students, educators, school teachers and administrators. They all attempt to provide a comprehensive informal planned program to mothers and four- to-six year neighborhood children. First day attendance increased in the percentages of children enrolled in the kindergarten level II. A discussion of the potential implications for improving kindergarten enrollment by informal collaborative initiative is also provided.

Keywords: Kindergarten Enrollment, Collaborative Initiative, teacher roles, and early childhood education university students field training objectives.

1. Introduction

Kindergarten is an educational establishment that prepares children, usually five-to six-year-olds, for the first year of compulsory education at school. The kindergarten program consists of two levels; Kindergarten I (KG I), and Kindergarten II (KG II). In Jordan, some kindergartens are privately managed and supervised while others are run by the government. Indeed, the kindergarten structure, process and outcome components including (class size, classroom environment, student-teacher ratio, teacher-child interaction, curriculum, assessment and services) are standardized and observed. The private kindergarten schools often have two levels; kindergarten level I (KG I), and kindergarten level II (KG II), while public schools have classes for kindergarten level II only. The permitted number of children for each class varies from a minimum of eight to a maximum of twenty five children.

Several research findings emphasized the importance of kindergarten enrollment as an important contributor to children's positive school outcomes (Graue, E. 2001; Dearing, E. et.al. 2008; Marielle, B. et. al. 2002; Sara, R. 2009). However, Kindergarten II at some public schools, where the early child hood education university students of -Al-Balqaa Applied University- trained to achieve the field training course objectives, closed down. This was due to the low number of children attended the kindergarten level II class. This, in turn, led to a shortage in the training areas of early child hood education university students which attracted our attention and raised the need to conduct the current study. In addition, some working mothers attended the school and verbalized the social and economic difficulties they and their children faced, since they had to transfer their children for a far distance private kindergarten. So, the current study sought to investigate the potential of a new type of initiative based on the idea of planning and implementing a university, school and family partnership program to improve the neighborhood children enrollment to kindergarten. The program will be initiated in collaboration between the academics, school staffs, and children families. The initiative program activities started four months in advance of school enrollment time, to give extra time for families to prepare themselves and their children, and to take the advantages of the availability of extra workers in the school represented by the undergraduate early childhood education students practicing to achieve their field training course objectives.

The Jordanian undergraduate early childhood education students' curriculum is covered over a four-year period. The field training course is the final undergraduate course, it's a preceptor ship course, where the early childhood education student's practice the teacher roles five days a week for six weeks in a one-to-one educational relationship of an experienced teacher who has been specially prepared to support, and guide and direct student learning during field training. The faculty member collaborates with the school teachers and administrators in planning, implementing, and evaluating the students' achievements of their field training objectives.

The collaborative initiative for improving kindergarten enrollment which will be evaluated through this study, relates to the school and teacher role and responsibilities in providing the community with appropriate learning environment. It also relates to the following field training course objectives of the early childhood education curriculum:

1. Integrate knowledge from the humanities and educational science in demonstrating the teacher role.
2. Collaborate with teachers and school administrators in the delivery of quality teaching practices.
3. Accept personal responsibility and accountability for teaching – learning process.
4. Serve as a change agent with children, families, community, and colleagues to meet changing teaching - learning needs.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to plan and implement a collaborative university, school, family partnership program to improve the children enrollment to kindergarten. The program started with identifying kindergarten eligible neighborhood children four months in advance of their kindergarten enrollment time, inviting mothers and children to visit the kindergarten classroom, meet the kindergarten teachers, share the school – community activities and finally appreciate the mothers' feedback.

2. Framework and Initiative Components

Epstein et. al. (2002) framework of school, family, and community partnerships was used to guide this initiative. The framework identified six types of involvement for creating school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein et. al. 2002). They are: parenting, volunteering, communicating, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community: Related to parenting involvement, schools may assist families with parenting skills, help parents understand development, and work with families to provide home conditions that support learning. In volunteering involvement, a school provides in place recruitment, training, and organizational processes for families that enable them to support children and school programs. Parents in volunteering involvement are supposed to help and support school activities and functions. In communicating involvement, the third type of involvement, schools have to develop effective two-way, frequent, systematic communication between home and school about school program's and children's progress. The fourth type of involvement learning at home schools has to provide parents with information needed to create family learning environment where parents are supposed to support and enhance learning at home.

In decision making involvement, the fifth type of involvement, parents participate in governance and advocacy activities. They make joint decisions with educators; schools ensure that parents' voices are heard. Collaborating with the community involvement emphasizes schools collaboration with community agencies in ways that support students learning and school experiences. The six types of involvement as proposed by Epstein (2001) are initiated in collaboration between the academic including university students, faculty, school teachers and administrators, and families with emphasize on the children mothers or the child's first care giver to improve the enrollment of neighborhood children to kindergarten.

Invitations for the families to attend the annual school week (a scheduled week which is held annually in a regular base and includes different recreational activities), brochures that include information regarding the importance of the kindergarten phase to children, kindergarten registration guidelines were distributed to families. Home visits for neighborhood families who have the targeted age group children were carried out by the school teacher and the early childhood education students supported by the volunteered school board community members. The mentioned brochure and some presents including gifts and sweets were also provided to mothers and their children.

3. Method

3.1 Study hypotheses

The main purpose of the informal collaborative initiative was to improve the neighborhood children enrollment to kindergarten level II. Therefore, this study was carried out to determine the effect of this initiative and test the following hypotheses:

1. Neighborhood children enrollment to kindergarten level II increased after implementing the collaborative initiative program as measured by children first day attendance to kindergarten.
2. Children mothers or first care givers expressed their satisfaction, and preferences for the initiative program activities.

3.2 Study design

To evaluate the initiative effectiveness pre and post intervention design (Polit, Beck & Hungler, 2013) were utilized. An assessment survey was also carried out to assess the number and percentage of children enrolled to kindergarten the last year before the initiative program implementation compared with the number and percentage of children enrolled to kindergarten after the initiative program implementation.

3.3 Population

The eligible population for this study was the entire neighborhood 4-5 year-old children who had no known cognitive deficits at the time the initiative implementation and their mothers or first care givers. Overall demographic characteristics of neighborhood community families including parents mean education, family number, and family income were matched and had no significant differences.

3.4 Sample

Purposive convenient Sampling procedure was used to obtain the larger number of children. An exclusion criterion includes 4-6 year children who had known cognitive deficit. Subsequent to exclusions of children based on mentioned exclusion criteria's, there were 20 children who met the sampling criteria and their mothers were included in the initiative program.

3.5 Setting

Elementary school started by kindergarten II up to 6th elementary class. The school is the only public elementary school, serve a local area located in the middle of Jordan. The area's total number of population according to the local governance estimation is 3500 different age group persons.

3.6 Instruments

3. 6.1 Demographic Questionnaire

Mother or the first care giver of the child had been taken as the informant. Informants indicated the 4-6 child or children parents age, educational status, marital status, occupation, living condition (living separately or with their extended families), total income of the family, number of family members and age of each family member, medical insurance, and their child's age, gender, order of the child or children 4-6 year among other children of the family, history of the family children enrollment to kindergarten, and the child or children 4-6 year medical history including cognitive status.

3. 6.2 Mother's or first care giver's reaction index

The mother or the first care giver of the child indicated his/her satisfaction, and preferences for the initiative program activities at the first day or during the first week of child enrollment to kindergarten.

3.7 Procedure

The initiative, introduced May 2015. To inspire the neighborhood families, teachers, the early childhood education students, and the researchers decided to include the school board and administrator as part of the initiative. There was no need for any administrative permission because all the planned work was accepted from the school administrators, teacher's role, and early childhood education students' field training requirements.

The first author (University faculty member), assisted by one of the school kindergarten teachers (the second author), supervised the initiative program establishment and recruitment activities which was held during May 2015, then the initiative supervision was carried out by the kindergarten teacher (the second author) .

The initiative started with meeting, expected personnel who might facilitate the initiative program activities including the school administrator, kindergarten teachers, and school board members. Early childhood education university students had also been invited to attend the first meeting. An explanation of the reason for the initiative and the possibility to continue or stop the procedures according to the participant's preference was provided. It was, then, followed by the establishment of the groups. The initiative which was held over 16 week's period started with one group of initiative facilitators. The group includes one teacher, 3 early childhood education students and 2 members of the school board. School board members as representatives for children families and community personnel. School board members' facilitate and decrease the workload in identifying the targeted children. Families with kindergarten age children were visited at their home by the initiative facilitator group, invitation to attend the school annual open week accompanied by their children provided to mothers. Brochures that include information regarding the importance of the kindergarten phase to children, as well as kindergarten registration guidelines were distributed to families.

Mothers and their kindergarten – aged children who attended the school annual open week were given special attention by the early childhood teacher and the early childhood education students. Some presents including gifts and sweets were also provided to mothers and their children. Toward the end of each initiative activity early childhood education students asked to submit an individual report about their opinions regarding the strengths and weakness of the initiative activity. Also within the first week of kindergarten enrollment mothers of kindergarten children were asked to fill the reaction index which was developed by the authors to fulfill the purpose of this study.

4. Results

The ultimate goal of the initiative was improving kindergarten enrollment, but the specific objective of the current study was to determine the number and the percentage of kindergarten-eligible children first – day attendance. Increased after the initiative program has been implemented. The results of this collaborative initiative were evaluated using Kirkpatrick's four levels of training effectiveness. Kirkpatrick's (1994) four levels of training effectiveness include reactions, knowledge gain, learning behavior, and results. Reactions, the first stage of Kirkpatrick's evaluation, relates to participant's attitudes, satisfaction, and preferences of the initiative. The results of the present study show that first –day attendance increased as many as 90% of the kindergarten-eligible children in the neighborhoods. It was, in turn, considered as a good indicator of the parents' satisfaction of the initiative. Mothers brought their children to kindergarten by themselves was taking as an indicator that the mothers whom were involved in the initiative reacting positively to the initiative. The second level of the training evaluation was evaluated through asking the participants to answer a group of questions (Appendix I). The positive feedback received from participants, both the early childhood education students and the mothers of kindergarten children provide evidence that the initiative met the purpose which it was planned for.

In that, it convinced the mothers of neighborhood kindergarten age group children to enroll their children, and helped the early childhood education students to achieve their clinical training objectives. (Appendix II a and b). Kirkpatrick's (1994) third level of training evaluation consists of behavior change, mothers attitudes which changed from almost preventing their children from attending the kindergarten to some of the willing attitude as bringing their kindergarten children by themselves were accepted as an indicator of behavior change. Early childhood education students correspond with the initiative activities could be accepted as a change in the students' behaviors. (Appendix III). Kirkpatrick's (1994) fourth level of training evaluation consists of result in fewer discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences when they encounter the new situation. This effect has been observed from the beginning. The positive mothers and students comments referring to the initiative activities provide support for the continuity of the initiative plan which aimed to help both the community families and the early childhood education students.

The following four questions guided the analysis of data what were the participants' perceptions of their experience of participation in the initiative activities...? * How did the participants perceive the impact of the initiative program activities on their life? * What other factors affected the above points? Analysis results indicated that the kindergarten enrollment as clarified from first-day attendance increased as many as 90%, 18 out of 20 of the kindergarten-eligible children in the neighborhoods attended the school for the first day of the first class. The two children who missed the first day of class had arrived on the second day with their mothers explained their excuse of missing the first day class.

5. Discussion

As what was mentioned early in this article, the primary purpose of this study was to help the early childhood education university students in achieving their field training course objectives, and improving the enrollment of 4-6 year children to kindergarten level II. The study found as clarified from the first – day attendance increased from 20% to 90% as an evidence of the effectiveness of the initiative program activities. Children mothers or first care givers expressed their satisfaction, and preferences for initiative program activities through their evaluation to the initiative program taken as evidence that the initiative was beneficial for the neighborhood kindergarten age group children and their families, which support the findings indicated by McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger (2007) that parents are eager to be more involved in their children's transition to kindergarten, and the early childhood education students. The study findings support the findings and recommendations provided by Hoover – Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S. & Closson, K. E. (2005) , when they conclude that school-based family involvement activities, such as attending a school open day and attending a parent – teacher conference facilitate the collaboration between the school and the children families for the benefit of the children. Also the findings of this study support the findings of study carried out by Sheldon, S. B. (2003). Sheldon emphasized the importance of school invitations to involve the children parents and the social networks as an important variable in improving the collaboration between schools and neighborhood children families.

7. Conclusion

The work of this study was based on the assumption that providing families of 4-6year children with information regarding the importance of the kindergarten phase to their children and kindergarten registration guidelines might help to increase neighborhood children kindergarten enrollment. It was also thought that this would be an opportunity to the early childhood education university students, through direct involvement with the initiative activities to facilitate the achievement of their field training course objectives. Research findings in easing transition to kindergarten strategies, program evaluation, and school-community interaction strategies were incorporated through the implementation process of the initiative. This initiative was evaluated using Kirkpatrick's four levels of training effectiveness. First –day attendance increased as many as 90% of the kindergarten-eligible children in the neighborhoods, positive feedback was received from the participant either the neighborhood mothers of kindergarten children and the early childhood education university students, indicate that both groups were gain a benefit from this work. The current study findings highlight the importance of university-school educational initiatives in improving the teaching learning and education process among the neighborhood community. Although, activities provided by school pre kindergarten admission must be sustained once the child enters the kindergarten to ensure continuity.

(Appendix I) Evaluation Questions

Participants after each initiative activities were asked to answer the following questions:

- How did you feel the activity went?
- What was the most positive aspect of the activity?
- How do you think the enrollment of neighborhood children to kindergarten could be improved?
- Any further comments?

(Appendix II a)

Quotations written by the 4-6 year neighborhood children mothers in evaluating the current initiative:

- ...The realization that I could assist my child through admitting him to the kindergarten , crated a confidence I had always felt lacking in myself.....
-It was your insistence that we could help ourselves and our children if we attend the annual school open week encourage me and my neighborhood women to attend the school
- ...One of the best thing we do is keeping kindergarten brochure so we look for the information by our self, then we will remember it more easily.
- First of all the attitude of the school teacher and the university students, the contact with the group and how they talk and how they interact with my child..
-You really encouraged me to bring my child by myself to kindergarten.....
- ... The best thing of all is the willing of my child to go to kindergarten...

(Appendix II b)

Quotations written by the early childhood education university students in evaluating the current initiative:

- ...I heard before about the community survey but this is the first time I process it.
-Every visit I found myself more and more oriented to the mothers feeling..
-More and more I know and know the rational behind the parent's attitude...
-I knows that my initiative in interacting with the 4-6 year children and their mothers it will work well.
- ...I realize how much more help and positive change we might do to our community.
- ...After my graduation I will establish an initiative for my neighborhood families.

Note: repetitive writing were excluded

(Appendix III)

Examples of early childhood education university students activities related to current initiative

Early Childhood Education University Students:

- Shared the home visit group.
- Distribute the invitation to attend the annual school open week card to neighborhood families.
- Provided the mothers of 4-6 year children with brochure which includes information's regarding the importance of the kindergarten phase to children and kindergarten registration guidelines.
- Relieved the mothers from looking after their children were the mothers permitted to went around the school and spend a time with school teachers.
- Carryout multi - recreational activities for the 4-6 year children and their mothers.

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