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The Impact of School Choice on the Early Literacy Achievement of Kindergarten Students

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The Impact of School Choice on the Early Literacy Achievement of Kindergarten

Students

by

Lydia L. Gabriel

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

the Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Kay A. Keiser, Ed.D., Chair

Omaha, NE

May 2012

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Abstract

The Impact of School Choice on the Early Literacy Achievement of Kindergarten Students

Lydia L. Gabriel, M.S.

University of Nebraska, 2012

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser

The purpose of this study was to discover if differences existed in the early literacy skills of non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open enrollment program and resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program at the beginning and end of their kindergarten year. As educational inequalities between disadvantaged students and their middle to upper class peers become more pronounced across the nation, federal, state, and local school governments continue to search for solutions. Many are hoping school choice programs are a plausible solution.

The independent variables in this study were students that qualify for free or reduced price lunch program participation and students that do not qualify for free or reduced price lunch program participation and non-resident kindergarten students selected for participation in the learning community open enrollment program and kindergarten resident students. The dependent variables for this study were the students' performance on the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 norm-referenced AIMSweb (a) letter naming fluency screen and (b) letter sound fluency screen and students' attendance as determined by number of days absent in the 2010-2011 school year.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Inequalities in educational opportunities for students of differing social classes have been present in the United States since the inception of public education. In the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court recognized the inequalities of racially segregated schools. In 1966 the Coleman Report cast widespread awareness to the achievement gaps that existed between middle class white students and many minority and low-income students (Southworth, 2010). The report's influential findings demonstrated that the socioeconomic composition of a school, independent of individual students' backgrounds, had a stronger effect on student achievement than any other factor. The report confirmed commonly held beliefs that students from low-income families attending schools consisting primarily of students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds frequently achieved poorly in school.

For more than two decades, research has shown that children residing in racially segregated neighborhoods with highly concentrated poverty experience diminished outcomes in life (Deluca & Rosenblatt, 2010). Neighborhoods and school quality are often linked, and in many instances, the quality of instruction declines as income levels decrease. While middle and upper class students are provided high quality research-based instruction, minority students and students of poverty are more likely to be taught using workbooks and worksheets on a daily basis. In addition, they frequently have less access to computers and technology for instruction (Kohn, 2011). Schools with high concentrations of poverty are often staffed by poorly skilled and unprepared teachers that lack access to necessary instructional resources (Murnane, 2007).

Most children living in poor neighborhoods attend schools in a zoned attendance area and therefore must settle for the education provided in those schools regardless of the quality. Middle class white families are able to exercise residential school choice by relocating to areas with the best schools. Families with extremely limited resources are unable to just pack up and move in order to access high quality schools. As a means to mitigate these educational inequalities, some states are experimenting with residential mobility programs to assist poor families in relocating to opportunity-rich communities by way of housing vouchers (Rosenbaum & DeLuca, 2008). However, these programs are not commonplace and are limited in their use. An ongoing gap in educational opportunity and access to high quality schools continues to exacerbate the achievement gap between low income and middle and upper class students.

The identified reasons why disadvantaged children receive a poorer quality of education are abundant and typically related. As previously described, housing patterns result in large numbers of poor children, who often require the most assistance, being enrolled in the same schools and the same school districts. Budget issues arise when school districts are unable to generate revenue in the form of property taxes from poor, deteriorating neighborhoods. Decreases in school budgets result in districts with lower salary scales that are unable to attract highly skilled teachers, and antiquated teacher transfer policies often allow the most skilled teachers to leave for better work environments (Murnane, 2007). Regardless of attempts to intervene, the cycle repeats over and over again.

While not new to education, school choice programs are gaining in popularity as a possible solution to the inequalities in public education. Choice programs vary from state

to state and district to district. Some school choice programs are governed by strict state legislation while other states have no school choice legislation at all (Doering, 1998). In states with no legislative requirements or states with loosely regulated choice programs, rules and regulations are left to the discretion of the local districts. In addition, some choice programs may involve inter-district transfers and yet others may only allow for intra-district transfers.

The state of Nebraska has had a school choice program since 1990. The program is known in state statute as option enrollment. The program was created to allow students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade to attend a school district other than that in which they reside (Nebraska Department of Education, 2011). The option enrollment program has numerous limitations. First, school districts are not required to provide transportation to students participating in the program. This often prevents parents from utilizing this school choice program as they are not able to transport their students to and from school. Another limitation is that districts have great leeway in setting capacity. There are no consistent requirements in determining what it means for a district, school building, or school program to be declared at capacity. The only requirement is that a district must have a board policy in place to determine the process for approving and disapproving option enrollment applications. Both of these limitations can affect the population of students that are able to utilize the program.

In 2007 the Nebraska legislature introduced and passed legislation creating learning communities in Nebraska. The Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties became the first in the state. This learning community consisted of the 11 school districts located in the 2-county area and was intended to improve educational

opportunities for all students attending these districts. A major component of this legislation was the introduction of a new school choice program referred to as the open enrollment program. The open enrollment program designed for the learning community replaced the previously used state-wide option enrollment program only for the 11 learning community school districts in an attempt to remedy perceived flaws in the option program. With this program, Nebraska began operating under two school choice programs, the open enrollment program for learning community districts and the option enrollment program for all other districts in the state.

The open enrollment program is different from the option enrollment program in two major areas. First, transportation is provided for two groups of students. Students eligible for participation in the free or reduced price lunch program are automatically eligible for transportation to their approved school of choice. In addition to this, students that contributed to the socioeconomic diversity of their approved school of choice are also eligible for transportation. This applies to two subgroups of students: those eligible to participate in the free or reduced price lunch program that will attend a school building with a low population of low income students and those not eligible to participate in the free or reduced price lunch program that will attend a school with a high population of low income students.

The other area in which the open enrollment program differs from option is the application process and the approval of these applications. Parents in the learning community wanting their child to attend a school building in a district other than their resident district must complete an open enrollment application and submit that application to the choice district no later than March 15. School districts must approve or

disapprove all applications no later than April 1 and notify parents by April 5. The number of applicants accepted to a building is dependent on the amount of capacity remaining in the building. Capacity is set using a formula created by a subcommittee of the learning community coordinative council. Parents of approved applicants must notify the district approving the application whether or not they will accept their placement by April 25. Applicants are allowed to apply to multiple school districts but may only accept placement at one school building if approved for multiple buildings or districts.

The application approval process for the learning community open enrollment program is different than Nebraska's option program in that it identifies priority groups for approval. The first approval priority group is siblings of students that will be attending the same school building in the year for which the applicant is applying. The next group receiving priority are those students contributing to the socioeconomic diversity of a building. Any remaining capacity after these two groups is filled using a random lottery selection process (Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, 2010). Giving application approval priority to students that contribute to the socioeconomic diversity of a school theoretically gives students of poverty greater access to high quality schools while diversifying predominantly low-income schools by admitting students coming from middle and upper class students.

School choice programs, if truly a solution to the inequities in public education, will play a significant role in providing quality instruction to disadvantaged children. Without exposure to effective instructional practices and quality curriculum, the achievement gap between poor children and their middle and upper class peers will continue to grow. It is essential to address the achievement gap early, especially in the

area of literacy. Failing to develop reading skills by third grade can have long-term implications for children living in poverty. Twenty-six percent of children who were poor for at least a year and did not read proficiently by the third grade dropped out of school (Hernandez, 2011). This is six times the rate of proficient readers.

It is critical that, through effective instruction, early literacy skills are developed early in a child's educational career, and interventions must be implemented when gaps exist. For this reason, this study aims to look at the early literacy skills of students entering kindergarten and upon completion of their kindergarten school year. Variables used are a student's eligibility status for the free or reduced price school lunch program and whether the student is participating in Nebraska's learning community school choice program or attending his/her neighborhood school as a resident student. The study will examine the impact of Nebraska's learning community school choice program and socioeconomic status on a student's achievement in the area of early literacy skills.

Research on the relationship between participation in school choice programs and student achievement is limited. Much of the research that has been done focused on secondary students and graduation. This study will fill a gap in educational research by analyzing student achievement in the first year of attending a full-day public school for students participating in their first year of a school choice program. This will provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of school choice programs as a means to provide equal access to quality education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover if a difference exists in the early literacy skills of non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open

enrollment program and resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program at the beginning and end of their kindergarten year. In addition the study will explore if differences exist in attendance for the 2010-2011 school year of resident and non-resident open enrolled kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program.

Research Questions

To analyze the achievement and attendance of resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program, the following questions will guide this study.

Research question #1. Is there significant difference between resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program on the grade level norm referenced Letter Naming Fluency Screen from the Fall 2010 pretest to the Spring 2011 posttest?

Research question #2. Is there significant difference between resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program on grade level norm referenced Letter Sound Fluency Screen from the Fall 2010 pretest to the Spring 2011 posttest?

Research question #3. Is there a significant difference in the attendance of resident and non-resident kindergarten children that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program for the 2010-2011 school year?

Definition of Terms

AIMSweb. A benchmark and progress monitoring system based on direct, frequent, and continuous student assessment (AIMSweb, n. d.). This system is utilized to

screen and progress monitor Westside Community Schools' students in the area of reading/literacy.

Early Literacy Skills. Critical pre-reading skills including phonemic awareness and the elements of phonics. For the purpose of this study, these skills are measured through the use of the AIMSweb letter naming fluency screening tool and the letter sound fluency screening tool.

Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program. A federally assisted meal program that provides low-cost or free lunches to public school students. Children with families having incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty level are eligible for free lunch while families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level are eligible for reduced price lunch (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012).

Letter Naming Fluency Screen. An AIMSweb Test of Early Literacy that measures students' ability to identify letters by name fluently (AIMSweb, n. d.). The instrument consists of 200 upper and lower case letters, and students must identify as many letter names as possible in one minute.

Letter Sound Fluency Screen. An AIMSweb Test of Early Literacy that measures students' ability to identify the sounds letters make in a fluent manner (AIMSweb, n. d.). The instrument consists of 200 lower case letters, and students must identify as many letter sounds as possible in one minute.

Low Income Students. For the purpose of this study, students eligible for and participating in the free or reduced price lunch program will be described as low income.

Open Enrollment Program. A school choice program created by the Nebraska Legislature as part of the legislation creating learning communities in the state of Nebraska pertaining only to districts that are part of a learning community.

Non-Resident Students. Students attending Westside Community Schools that do not reside within the identified school district boundaries of Westside Community Schools are referred to as non-resident students. For the purpose of this study these students are enrolled in Westside Community Schools through the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy County's open enrollment program.

Resident Students. Students attending Westside Community Schools that reside within identified attendance boundaries of Westside Community Schools are referred to as resident students.

Assumptions

This study has numerous strengths. All students were in their first year of public school and attending a kindergarten class within the same school district. All students were taught by teachers in possession of at least a bachelor's degree in elementary education or early childhood education. The district's kindergarten curriculum is consistent among buildings and classrooms, and all kindergarten teachers have been provided similar professional development. Furthermore, all kindergarten teachers participate in grade level meetings to assist in maintaining consistency among classrooms. Finally, all screenings were conducted with fidelity and within the same test windows throughout the school year.

Limitations/Delimitations of the Study

Minimal limitations and delimitations are present in this study. A delimitation of this study is the fact that it takes place in one school district within a larger metro area. The researcher conducting this study is the administrator of the open enrollment program for the district. In addition, this study looks at data over the course of one school year rather than multiple school years, and there is no means for comparing how the non-resident students or a similar population would have performed in their resident district. This will limit the ability to generalize the results to other populations. This study does not take into consideration a child's exposure to preschool experiences prior to starting his/her kindergarten year, which is a limitation. It is possible that some children may have participated in multiple years of preschool while others none at all.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Research. A review of professional literature suggested additional research is needed on the subject of school choice and its impact on the attainment of early literacy skills in children of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Much of the existing research highlights achievement levels of school choice students in upper elementary or secondary schools. This study will look at the early literacy achievement of students in the first year of elementary school as well as year one of their participation in the open enrollment school choice program.

Contribution to Practice. Based on this study, Westside Community Schools may choose to review interventions and instructional methods used with kindergarten students in the area of literacy. In addition, they may choose to improve upon

differentiated instruction based on students' varying socioeconomic and residency demographics.

Contribution to Policy. The results of this study will provide insight on how residency status in combination with socioeconomic status relates to the achievement in the area of early literacy. Many school choice policies and programs are developed under the assumption that the program will increase student achievement. This study will provide a point of reference for the development of future policies.

Organization of the Study

The literature review relevant to this research study is presented in Chapter 2. The chapter reviews professional literature related to poverty and its effects on children, inequalities in education, the importance of early literacy skill development, and school choice programs as a solution to educational inequalities. Chapter 3 describes the research design, methodology, independent and dependent variables, and procedures that will be used to gather and analyze data. This will include a description of the participants and how they were identified for the purpose participation, a list of dependent variables, and a list of independent variables. Descriptions of the dependent measures and the data used to statistically determine if the null hypothesis is rejected for the research questions will also be included.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

It is well documented that children living in poverty demonstrate lower academic proficiency than their middle class counterparts. These children come to school with a smaller vocabulary as well as fewer pre-academic skills in general. This begins the start of an achievement gap that often widens as the children move through elementary and secondary school. This gap is evidenced in the early childhood years through deficits in oral language and lagging emergent literacy skills (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). Students with these early deficits are significantly at risk for developing reading problems later. Numerous school reforms have targeted this achievement gap with little success.

Childhood Poverty

Poverty in the United States. The United States Census Bureau recently reported poverty has risen to the highest number in the 52 years it has been reporting with 46.2 million people living below the official poverty line. In addition to this, the National Center of Educational Statistics found that, in 2009, 19% of school students were living in poverty. This is an increase from 15% in 2000 and 17% in 1990. Almost half of the children living in poverty could be described as living in extreme poverty, a condition defined by income levels of less than half of the federal poverty threshold (Children's Defense Fund, 2010). Poor economic conditions in the nation continue to exacerbate this problem as more and more families struggle to make ends meet.

Since 1950, America's population density in central inner cities has declined by 50% (Porth, 2002). This decentralization frequently results in the segregation of citizens by race and income leaving large concentrations of inner city families experiencing

poverty. Many of these families do not have access to sufficient jobs, housing, or schools and are more likely to experience higher neighborhood crime rates, poor living conditions, and less access to quality social services (Jensen, 2009).

Poverty and Health. It is well known that poverty has multiple adverse affects on the health of children. Children living in conditions of poverty experience higher incidence of asthma, respiratory infections, tuberculosis, ear infections and hearing loss, and obesity (Jensen, 2009). Given the notion that these children rarely have health insurance, many of these illnesses are left untreated thereby intensifying the seriousness of the conditions. Not only are these children more likely to develop poor health conditions but also are much more likely to suffer significant long-term affects and even death as a result. It goes without saying that these health problems impact a child's ability to achieve in the classroom setting.

Poverty and Achievement. Most professionals in the field of education have an understanding that low socioeconomic status frequently correlates to lower achievement levels. Often missing is an understanding of the causes behind this trend and how to mitigate the effects of poverty. This relationship between poverty and achievement has been attributed to numerous circumstances including genetics or an inability to learn. In other cases, some believe the difficulty in addressing non-school problems prevents these students from achieving at higher levels (Rothstein, 2008). However, it is likely that this relationship is a function of a conglomerate of challenges families in poverty face.

High rates of tardiness and absenteeism are common problems of children experiencing poverty (Jensen, 2009). A study conducted by Rappaport, Daskalakis, and Andrel (2011) found that the absence rate for children qualifying for free or reduced price

lunch was 24% higher than among those that did not qualify. The reasons for the absences vary in nature. Poor health conditions, lack of transportation, and disconnection from school have been attributed to increased rates of absenteeism. In addition, children from poor families are more likely to have parents that work multiple jobs and rely on older children to supervise younger siblings rather than attend school. This is of particular concern as high rates of absenteeism are highly correlated to drop out rates (Jensen, 2009).

Increased mobility is also a common characteristic of children in poverty. Due to lack of resources, poor families are more likely to fall behind in rent or mortgage payments causing frequent moves. Their children then change schools more frequently resulting in a loss of continuity of instruction (Rothstein, 2008). Highly mobile students also tend to have more absences than students that attend the same school over a period of years.

Another challenge for children of poverty is their family's history with the educational system. Many parents of these children have had negative experiences with education as children themselves and as a result have a negative attitude toward education in general (Jensen, 2009). They are likely leery to participate in school activities and may even discourage their children from participating in school or extracurricular activities. Children in poverty may come to accept this attitude toward school as the norm.

Another barrier for children of poverty is a lack of readiness skills when they enter school. These children often begin school with limited life experiences and insufficient exposure to books or print materials (Beck, 2011). In addition, their

repertoire of vocabulary is often much less than that of children from middle class families. Studies have found that low-income caregivers speak in shorter and more grammatically simple sentences using a less sophisticated vocabulary. As a result their children experience a limited range of vocabulary thereby affecting the child's own development (Hoff, 2003; Weizman & Snow, 2001). While most children starting school have been exposed to more than 5 million words and know nearly 13,000, this is not often the result for low-income children. Language development is highly correlated with reading, and children starting out this far behind are at a significant disadvantage.

Not all students coming from low-income homes start out behind their peers. Some begin their school careers commensurate with the others in their class. However, a study conducted by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that nearly half of the children from low-income families that ranked in the top quarter of their class in reading during their first grade year fell out of that rank by fifth grade (2007). Even when children of poverty start out in the top quartile, there is a good chance they will not sustain those achievement levels. Even when disadvantaged students are proficient readers by third grade, nearly 11% still drop out of high school (Hernandez, 2011). Without exposure to a high quality education, many poor students cannot maintain high achievement levels.

It is well documented that children from poverty, on average, achieve lower than their middle class counterparts, and this achievement gap is particularly pronounced in the area of reading and literacy. The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), as well as every other assessment of student outcomes, continues to indicate that socioeconomic status is still the single most influential factor on a student's

educational and other life outcomes (Levin, 2007). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, on each NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) assessment given between the years of 1998 and 2009 students attending high poverty schools had average scores lower than that of students attending school with a low population of students in poverty in the area of reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). If this trend is to be changed, there must be an emphasis on early intervention in the area of reading. Recently, the results of national assessments have shown that only 43% of low-income fourth graders in large urban districts read at a basic level or higher (Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008). This performance gap in literacy for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has long existed despite valiant efforts to overcome it.

Early Literacy Skills

Importance of Literacy. Reading skills are among the most critical skills for children to develop as they progress through school. As grade levels increase, reading becomes the foundation for most other content areas, and children must rely more and more on reading skills to achieve across curriculum areas. Research has consistently shown children successful in reading are much more likely to excel in other academic areas while children with poor reading skills struggle to progress in other content areas (Kim, Petscher, Schatschneider, & Foorman, 2010; Sloat, Beswick, & Willms, 2007). In addition, children behind in their reading skills often have fewer opportunities to practice reading, fewer chances to learn reading comprehension strategies, and more frequently experience text that is too advanced for their level (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000).

These challenges make it difficult for these students to catch up thereby demonstrating the necessity of acquiring reading skills early and intervening as soon as deficits appear.

The negative effects of low literacy skills are well documented. Poor self-esteem, low motivation, behavior difficulties, academic underachievement, and ultimately reduced economic and occupational status are all consequences of poor reading skills (Sloat et al., 2007). Not only do poor literacy skills affect later academic achievement, but also a lack of these skills can have significant implications for other aspects of a child's life.

The importance of developing literacy and reading skills drew even greater attention with the publication of the National Reading Panel's report, *Teaching Children to Read*. In summary this report identified five critical components of reading. These components, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension became the foundation of reading instruction across the nation. This report significantly influenced the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act also known as the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. This piece of legislation placed unprecedented emphasis on assessment and accountability, particularly in the area of reading (Schilling, Carlisle, Scott, & Zeng, 2007). Districts and schools became accountable for the reading performance of all students regardless of their background placing even greater importance on developing early literacy skills.

Early Literacy Skills. Early literacy skills refer to those skills that are foundational to conventional forms of reading and include phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, and print concepts (Kim et al., 2008). Phonemic awareness refers to an individual's awareness of the individual sounds found in words (Allen, 2003). Letter

knowledge is a child's ability to identify and name letters. The skill of print concepts refers to such things as knowing the difference between pictures and printed words, left to right and top to bottom orientation, and knowing how to properly hold a book.

Knowledge about letters and sounds, print and pictures, and words and sentences are prerequisites to learning to read in later grades (Bodrova, Leong, & Paynter, 1999). If these skills are not developed early, students are much more likely to struggle with later reading concepts.

The kindergarten year is a critical period of growth for children's emergent literacy (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). Not all children come to school with similar knowledge regarding print, and educators must meet these students where they are. Children with a lot of prior experiences will need instruction that will extend their knowledge while those with few prior experiences will need direct instruction to introduce them to the concept of printed language (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). In all instances, children will need to be exposed to a rich print environment to develop early literacy skills.

Also important is the fact that reading skills are not "hardwired" into children's brains, and each skill and sub-skill must be explicitly taught (Jensen, 2009). Therefore, children must be exposed to quality instruction in safe learning environments early on to ensure proper development of their literacy skills. Unfortunately, children of poverty are less likely to attain mastery of early literacy skills. One reason for this is the often-cited claim of unequal access to high quality education.

Inequities in Public Education

Children living in poverty often reside in areas or neighborhoods saturated with families in similar financial situations. This concentrated poverty, typically occurring in large urban cities, results in dilapidated housing, unsafe neighborhoods, and poor schools. Nationally, disadvantaged urban students continue to attend high poverty schools (Southworth, 2010). In many cases, these low-performing schools have limited access to resources and are staffed with under-skilled teachers. Teaching in these schools is difficult, and many skilled teachers choose to teach in more advantaged schools. The remaining teachers are those that may be less skilled with less experience (Murnane, 2007).

Some believe that poor children achieve at lower levels as a result of curriculum that is less rigorous. The accountability movement and increased federal involvement in public education has placed increased emphasis on standardized test scores. As a result, high poverty schools may focus on rote skills, memorization, and other strategies that may produce higher test scores. However, this focus limits the amount of time children are able to spend on such things as creativity, exploration of ideas, and other higher order thinking skills (Kohn, 2011.) Failing to engage in higher order thinking inhibits a child's ability to achieve at high levels.

School Choice

One solution to the inequities in public education that continues to gain momentum is increased school choice for parents. The concept of school choice is not new to public education. The notion of school vouchers can be traced back to 1778 when Adam Smith, author and publisher of *The Wealth of Nations*, argued parents were most

suiting to decide how their children should be educated, and the state should provide them with money to hire suitable teachers (Public Broadcasting System, n. d.). In 1798, Thomas Paine echoed these beliefs when he suggested poor parents be given money by the state to obtain a basic education for their children. The mid 1800s drew attention to school choice when, in 1842, the New York legislature barred religious instruction in schools and prohibited providing state money to denominational schools. This eventually spread to other states and became policy.

School choice, charter schools, and vouchers made great strides in 1952 with the publishing of *Capitalism and Freedom*. In this book, Milton Friedman hypothesized that if parents could “shop” for schools, public schools would have to improve in order to attract students. This notion surfaced again in the 1990s when supporters argued that the application of free market choice to public education had the ability to transform the entire system. Finally, the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its provision allowing students to transfer out of failing schools secured the government’s hand in the school choice debate.

School Choice Programs. Since these events school choice programs have expanded greatly. The types of programs vary across settings. Perhaps the oldest form of school choice is that of residential choice meaning parents simply move to the attendance area of their choice school (Greene, Loveless, MacLeod, Nechyba, Peterson, Rosenthal, & Whitehurst, 2010). Clearly a rudimentary form of school choice, parents opting for this are often limited by a number of other factors. Families must also consider such things as the location of their work place, affordable housing, and the overall availability of housing in the desired area. Relocating is an expensive and time-

consuming activity that many cannot afford. In many ways, residential choice is the most inequitable form of school choice (Greene et al., 2010).

One of the earliest school choice programs came in the form of intra-district when, in 1974, New York's District 4 in Harlem implemented a program allowing its students to choose to attend any school in the district (Public Broadcasting System, n. d.). Magnet schools also evolved from this version of school choice. Traditionally, magnet schools have been operated by public school districts to obtain a more balanced enrollment both racially and by socioeconomic status (Greene et al., 2010). These schools are often found in large urban districts that have become geographically segregated. Magnet schools typically share three common characteristics. They are designed around a common theme or focus, consist of selected students and staff, and serve students from a variety of attendance areas (Brouillette, 2010). While magnet schools offer new opportunities for families, they frequently have quotas allowing only a limited number of students to take advantage of the programs.

Intra-district choice programs are implemented by school districts and allow parents the freedom to select, or sometimes apply, to attend schools other than their neighborhood school. This type was the choice program selected by Congress and written into the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. The operating district with rules and guidelines developed by that same district regulates these programs. In many instances, these programs consist of tight parameters and often contain restrictive requirements regarding the number of students that can be accepted into any one school, classroom, or grade level. Programs such as this are often not able

to allow all students wishing to transfer the ability to attend the school of their first choice.

Interdistrict school choice is another common form of parental choice programs. In its simplest form, these programs allow parents to select for their children a public school system or district other than that in which they reside. In many instances these programs are mandated by state legislation. Some states have specific statute that prescribes in detail the implementation of these programs among districts. Other states are more flexible in their implementation and allow school districts more flexibility in how the program is governed within their districts. For example, Georgia's interdistrict choice program is one that allows school districts to operate at their own discretion (Doering, 1998). Each school district has freedom to create its own policy determining how students can transfer in and out of the district.

School Choice and Socioeconomic Diversity. School choice is frequently utilized as a method to achieve racially diverse school buildings and school districts. However, school choice is also used as a means of creating socioeconomic diversity among schools. Given the fact that many students categorized as low-income frequently come from minority families, it is often difficult to separate the two intended purposes. In order for a school choice program to effectively impact the socioeconomic diversity of a school, parents of children from middle to upper class households must select schools with high enrollments of students from low-income families while low-income families select schools with large enrollments of students from middle to upper class households.

A study conducted by Holme and Richards (2009) looked at Colorado's interdistrict choice program within the context of the metropolitan area of Denver. They

found that higher income students were much more likely to participate in the choice program and were more likely to transfer to school districts with more higher income students. This finding contrasts the notion that school choice positively impacts the socioeconomic diversity of a school district. Colorado's choice program is entirely deregulated with no requirements to inform families of their choice options and no requirements for the provision of transportation. Given the belief that low-income families may be less informed than their middle and upper class counterparts as well as the fact that transportation often acts as a barrier, it is not surprising that fewer poor families participated.

Another study that reviewed the flow patterns of both Colorado's and Minnesota's open enrollment programs found in both states more students leave districts with higher percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2011). In Minnesota, more students were flowing in to districts with larger proportions of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. However, data from the study found that socioeconomic factors did not appear to be the primary determinant in school choice enrollment patterns.

School Choice and Achievement. Another belief surrounding school choice is students attending high achieving schools or school districts are more likely to obtain higher achievement scores than those same students would have if they were attending schools with low achievement scores. Simply stated, attending school with high achieving students produces higher achievement scores in all students. There have been a number of studies relative to school choice and its affect on student achievement, but the results are far from conclusive. A study of Milwaukee Public Schools' choice program

found students enrolled in magnet schools performed better than the corresponding peers attending assigned schools (Mitchell, 1989). More recently, researchers Daniel O'Brien and James Murdoch evaluating a district school choice program in Texas also found that students attending a choice district outperformed students in a similar non-choice district (as cited in Ledwith, 2010). Contradicting this research are the results of a study conducted by Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt. They found that students attending magnet schools in Chicago were no more likely to have higher test scores than those not attending magnet schools (2005). Conversely, another study conducted on Chicago public schools found positive results in early grades (Hoxby, 2005). However, those results disappeared as students got older. Because of these mixed results, it is difficult to determine if participation in school choice programs truly results in higher achievement.

School Choice and Poverty. While school choice is often touted as a way for children of poverty to escape poor, ineffective schools, it is often difficult for the parents of these children to take advantage of these opportunities. As previously stated, children of lower income families participate less in school choice programs than their corresponding middle and upper class peers. This may be attributed to a lack of information and resources provided to families of poverty. Even when programs provide parent support centers or other resources, less advantaged families are often unaware that these supports even exist (Petronio, 1996). Failing to acquire adequate information about schools and school choice programs leads poor parents to make decisions on unreliable information, such as "copying" the requests of their friends (Petronio, 1996). Yet another obstacle families of poverty must face is the fact that many school choice programs lack oversight and fail to control for policies that intentionally restrict those students needing

the opportunity the most. Rarely do the most desirable schools allow a large influx of students of low socioeconomic background (Conte, 2002). Families of poverty are often the desired participants of school choice programs, but the many barriers they face frequently limit their involvement.

More research must be conducted on school choice programs and its impact on students and student achievement. If it is to be used as a method to provide students of poverty greater opportunity in education or to reduce inequalities in schools, we must know more. Early literacy skills are critical for students to acquire, and educators cannot waste time implementing ineffective policies and programs. Despite its lengthy history in education, school choice and its outcomes on student achievement, particularly in the area of literacy, remain inconclusive.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter describes participants, procedures, independent variable descriptions, dependent measures and instrumentation, research questions, and data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if a difference exists in the early literacy skills of non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open enrollment program and resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program at the beginning and end of their kindergarten year. In addition the study will determine if differences exist in attendance for the 2010-2011 school year of resident and non-resident open enrolled kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program.

Research Design

The four-group pretest-posttest comparative study design includes Group 1, a naturally formed group of same school district non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open enrollment program that qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program ($n = 21$). Group 2 is a randomly selected group of same school district non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open enrollment program that do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program ($n = 21$). Group 3 consists of randomly selected same school district resident kindergarten students that qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program ($n = 21$). Group 4 is a randomly selected group of same school district resident kindergarten students that do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program ($n = 21$).

Participants

The maximum accrual for this student will be $N = 84$. Kindergarten students that participated in the study were enrolled in one of fifteen Westside Community Schools' Elementary School Buildings during the 2010/2011 school year. Students attended a full year of kindergarten and participated in the same curriculum across school buildings. All students met the age requirement to begin kindergarten and began kindergarten prior to reaching the mandatory attendance age. Kindergarten students in their first year of public school attending Westside Community Schools were eligible to participate in the study.

Gender of the total study participants $N = 84$ was female $n = 37$ (44%) and male $n = 47$ (56%). The gender make-up of the district $N = 5911$ was female $n = 2876$ (49%) and male $n = 3035$ (51.3%). The ethnic origin of the study participants was White not Hispanic, $n = 58$ (69%), Black not Hispanic, $n = 16$ (19%), Asian, $n = 2$ (2%), Hispanic, $n = 0$ (0%), American Indian, $n = 0$ (0%), and 2 or more races, $n = 8$ (9%). The make-up of ethnic origins for Westside Community Schools' students during the 2010/2011 school year was White not Hispanic = 78.5%, Black not Hispanic = 7.2%, Asian = 3.2%, Hispanic 6%, American Indian = .8%, and 2 or more races = 4.1%.

Method of participant identification. Group 1 was a naturally formed group of 21 non-resident students who were attending Westside Community Schools through the learning community open enrollment program and were eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program. The remaining 66 students in groups 2, 3, and 4 were randomly selected from the population of non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open enrollment program and resident students in the kindergarten class. There were no individual identifiers attached to any aspect of the data.

Study Constant: Description of the District Kindergarten Program

All kindergarten students attending Westside Community Schools participate in a full day kindergarten program. Curricula is approved by the Board of Education and consistently implemented in all elementary schools. The curricula covers the core areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies as well as art, physical education, music, and media instruction. Similar technology is available in all kindergarten programs, and all kindergarten students have access to the same software. Students in all kindergarten programs have access to the same support programs including but not limited to guidance counselors and instructional specialists.

The elementary reading/literacy curriculum consists of instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension strategies, word analysis, and vocabulary. The curriculum model used in grades kindergarten through second grade is Literacy by Design, a program that offers a research-based combination of systematic skill and strategy development along with quality literature to develop reading skills in all students (Westside Community Schools Elementary Parent Handbook, 2011).

Independent Variable Descriptions

The independent variables for this study are (a) qualification for free or reduced price lunch program participation and (b) enrollment status. Students will be randomly selected to reflect the overall demographics of the districts. Free or reduced price lunch program participation status will be (a) students that qualify for free or reduced price lunch program participation and (b) students that do not qualify for free or reduced price lunch program participation. Enrollment status will be (a) non-resident kindergarten

students selected for participation in the learning community open enrollment program and (b) kindergarten resident students.

Dependent Measures

The following research questions focused on the dependent variable of academic achievement in the area of early literacy and attendance. Kindergarten early literacy achievement was determined by performance on the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 norm-referenced AIMSweb (a) letter naming fluency screen and (b) letter sound fluency screen. Attendance was determined by number of days absent in the 2010-2011 school year.

AIMSweb is a benchmark and progress monitoring system based on continuous and frequent student assessment. The AIMSweb screening instrument for letter naming fluency consists of 200 letters, both upper and lower case, in which students must name as many letters as possible in one minute. The maximum time a student can spend on one letter is three seconds, at which time the administrator identifies the letter for the student, and prompts the student to move to the next letter. The instrument is a standardized assessment and must be administered the same to each student. Teachers administering the assessment are trained on the administration procedures (AIMSweb, n. d.). The AIMSweb screening instrument for letter naming fluency is both a reliable and valid predictor of later reading success.

The AIMSweb screening instrument for letter sound fluency consists of 200 lower case letters in which students must name the sounds of as many letters as possible in one minute. The maximum time a student can spend on one letter is three seconds, at which time the administrator identifies the sound of the letter for the student, and prompts the student to move to the next letter. The instrument is a standardized assessment and must

be administered the same to each student. Teachers administering the assessment are trained on the administration procedures (AIMSweb, n. d.). The AIMSweb screening instrument for letter sound fluency is both a reliable and valid predictor of later reading success.

Westside Community Schools' attendance policy complies with state statute. Students are expected to be in attendance each day unless excused by a parent or guardian. Administration of student absences and tardiness is the responsibility of the building principal and the district's attendance officer. In Westside Community Schools attendance at the elementary is monitored in half-day increments. Two half-days of absences would be the equivalent of one full day. Parents of students missing five, ten, fifteen, and then twenty full days of school receive letters at each benchmark from the district attendance officer, the building principal, and/or the county attorney. At twenty full days of absence, regardless of the reasons for the absences, a mandatory referral to the county attorney must be made. District personnel monitor attendance for resident and non-resident students in the same way (Westside Community Schools Elementary Parent Handbook, 2011).

Research Questions

Research question #1. Is there a significant difference between resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program on the grade level norm referenced Letter Naming Fluency Screen from the Fall 2010 pretest to the Spring 2011 posttest?

Research question #2. Is there a significant difference between resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price

lunch program on grade level norm referenced Letter Sound Fluency Screen from the Fall 2010 pretest to the Spring 2011 posttest?

Research question #3. Is there a significant difference in the attendance of resident and non-resident kindergarten children that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program for the 2010-2011 school year?

Data Analysis

Data for questions 1 and 2 will be analyzed using repeated measure two-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) with factors of time (pretest/posttest) and groups (resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program). ANOVA is a statistical test of significance used to determine if a difference exists in the means of two or more groups at a selected probability level. An analysis of variance was selected for this study because the number of study groups exceeds two. Data for question 3 will be analyzed using a one-way ANOVA for the same reason previously listed.

Data Collection Procedures

All study AIMSweb screening and criterion referenced data is retrospective, archival and routinely collected school data. Permission from the appropriate school research personnel has been obtained.

Chapter 4

Results

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a difference existed in the early literacy skills of non-resident kindergarten students participating in the learning community open enrollment program and resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program at the beginning and end of their kindergarten year. In addition the study examined whether or not differences existed in attendance for the 2010-2011 school year of resident and non-resident open enrolled kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program.

Research Question 1

Is there a significant difference between resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program on the grade level norm referenced Letter Naming Fluency Screen from the Fall 2010 pretest to the Spring 2011 posttest?

Letter Naming Fluency Screen. There was no statistically significant main effect for interaction within groups, $F(3, 80) = .992, p = .401$. There was no statistically significant main effect for interaction between groups, $F(3, 80) = .491, p = .689$. There was a statistically significant main effect for time (pretest kindergarten/posttest kindergarten), $F(3, 80) = 395.13, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.83$.

The statistically significant main effect for time indicated that kindergarten students' scores increased significantly from the pretest ($M = 25.08, SD = 17.75$) to posttest ($M = 54.95, SD = 18.22$) regardless of the group. The means and standard

deviations of the Letter Naming Fluency Screen scores are displayed in Table 1. The ANOVA for the Letter Naming Fluency Screen scores is displayed in Table 2.

Research question #2.

Is there a significant difference between resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program on grade level norm referenced Letter Sound Fluency Screen from the Fall 2010 pretest to the Spring 2011 posttest?

Letter Sound Fluency Screen. There was no statistically significant main effect for group, $F(3, 80) = 0.980, p = .406$. There was no statistically significant interaction between groups, $F(3, 80) = 1.489, p = .224$. There was a statistically significant main effect for time (pretest kindergarten/posttest kindergarten), $F(3, 80) = 499.61, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.86$.

The statistically significant main effect for time indicated that kindergarten students' scores increased significantly from the pretest ($M = 8.94, SD = 11.52$) to posttest ($M = 39.69, SD = 14.47$) regardless of the group. The means and standard deviations of the Letter Sound Fluency Screen scores are displayed in Table 3. The ANOVA for the Letter Sound Fluency Screen scores is displayed in Table 4.

Research question #3.

Is there a significant difference in the attendance of resident and non-resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program for the 2010-2011 school year?

Attendance. There was no statistically significant main effect for attendance between groups, $F(3, 80) = .91, p = .439$. The means and standard deviations for attendance are displayed in Table 5. The ANOVA for attendance is displayed in Table 6.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Letter Naming Fluency Screen Scores

	Pretest Kindergarten		Posttest Kindergarten	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group 1	20.86	15.43	51.86	18.97
Group 2	24.19	16.88	57.24	18.71
Group 3	27.67	18.75	53.62	18.06
Group 4	27.62	19.99	57.10	17.89
Total	25.08	17.75	54.95	18.22

Table 2
ANOVA for Letter Naming Fluency Screen Scores

Source of Variation	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Between Subjects					
Group	3	276.48	0.49	.69	.02
Error	80	562.73			
Within Subjects					
Time	1	37470.72	395.13	<.01	.83
Interaction	3	94.07	0.99	.41	.04
Error	80	562.73			

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Letter Sound Fluency Screen Scores

	Pretest Kindergarten		Posttest Kindergarten	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group 1	5.43	8.12	35.67	11.63
Group 2	8.14	12.07	42.86	16.33
Group 3	9.24	11.89	37.86	15.36
Group 4	8.94	11.52	42.38	13.86
Total	8.94	11.52	39.69	14.47

Table 4
ANOVA for Letter Sound Fluency Screen Scores

Source of Variation	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Between Subjects					
Group	3	383.88	1.49	.22	.05
Error	80	257.88			
Within Subjects					
Time	1	39713.63	499.61	<.01	.86
Interaction	3	77.93	0.98	.41	.04
Error	80	79.49			

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Attendance (days absent)

	Days Absent	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group 1	6.95	4.52
Group 2	5.05	3.20
Group 3	7.02	5.65
Group 4	5.95	4.25
<hr/>		
Total	6.24	4.83

Table 6

ANOVA for Attendance (days absent)

Source of Variation	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
<hr/>					
Between Subjects					
Group	3	18.38	0.91	.44	.03
Error	80	20.17			
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Chapter 5

Conclusions and Discussions

Educators and educational researchers have, for decades, commonly acknowledged the existence of inequalities in educational opportunities for students of varying social classes. Students living in high poverty neighborhoods attending their neighborhood school with other students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds frequently achieve at lower levels than their middle class peers attending schools consisting of other mid to upper class students. This notion was confirmed as early as 1966 with the issuing of the Coleman Report (Southworth, 2010). While it is acknowledged and understood, there has been very little success in addressing this gap in opportunity.

School choice is not a new concept to the field of education but in recent years has risen to the top of the list of possible solutions to educational disadvantage. State and local governments have created school choice programs in an effort to thwart educational inequalities for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The federal government even tried its hand in school choice by including a required choice provision for failing schools in the 2001 passing of No Child Left Behind. The programs vary in their rules and regulations and often are flawed in ways that undermine their true intent. Nonetheless, the number of school choice programs continues to rise.

The state of Nebraska implemented its first school choice program, option enrollment, in 1990 and added the open enrollment program in 2007 as part of a piece of legislation creating learning communities in the state. This program first took effect in

the 2010-2011 school year for school districts included in a learning community with the goal of creating a level playing field for economically disadvantaged students.

The purpose of this study was to discover if a difference existed in the early literacy skills of non-resident students participating in the learning community open enrollment program that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program and resident kindergarten students that do and do not qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program at the beginning and end of their kindergarten year. In addition, the study explored if differences existed in the attendance of these same students for the 2010-2011 school year. Results were drawn from the AIMSweb Letter Naming Fluency Screen and the AIMSweb Letter Sound Fluency Screen. Attendance data was gathered from the research district's student information management system, PowerSchool. Conclusions are shared for each of these areas followed by discussions and implications.

Conclusions

Letter Naming Fluency

All study participants took the AIMSweb letter naming fluency screen in the fall, winter, and spring. For the purpose of this study, only the fall and spring scores were analyzed.

While there was no significant main effect for groups, there were several findings that merit discussion. Both Group 3 ($M = 27.67$, $SD = 18.75$) and Group 4 ($M = 27.62$, $SD = 19.99$) consisted of resident students and appeared to have similar letter naming skills at the start of the year. However, the resident students eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program, Group 3, did not show as much growth ($M = 53.62$, $SD =$

18.06) as those not eligible, Group 4 ($M = 57.10$, $SD = 17.89$) from pre to posttest. While the gap is not large enough to be statistically significant, it may be an area in which the research district needs to monitor. There was no significant main effect for interaction between groups. Study participants, regardless of the group, did not start or end the year with significantly different skills in letter naming fluency.

There was a significant main effect for time (pretest kindergarten/posttest kindergarten) $F(3, 80) = 395.13$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.83$ indicating that students scores increased significantly from the fall pretest ($M = 25.08$, $SD = 17.75$) to the spring posttest ($M = 54.95$, $SD = 18.22$). An increase in scores was an anticipated result, and it was encouraging to see significant increases in all groups.

Letter Sound Fluency

All study participants took the AIMSweb letter sound fluency screen in the fall, winter, and spring. For the purpose of this study, only the fall and spring scores were analyzed.

While there was no significant main effect for groups, there were findings that should be noted. While Group 3 consisting of resident students that qualified for the free or reduced price lunch program ($M = 9.24$, $SD = 11.89$) started the year with higher levels of achievement than Group 1 ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 8.12$) and Group 2 ($M = 8.14$, $SD = 12.07$), both non- resident groups, they ended the year demonstrating higher achievement than only Group 1. This means that students not eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program appeared to make greater gains than those eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program, with non-resident students not eligible for free or reduced price lunch showing the most growth. While not statistically significant, this should be an area of

concern for the research district. It is common knowledge in education that children from low-income homes frequently demonstrate diminished outcomes in school, and findings such as this indicate a need to monitor the performance of these students carefully. There was no significant main effect for interaction between groups. Study participants did not start or end the year with significantly different skills in letter sound fluency regardless of their group.

There was a significant main effect for time (pretest kindergarten/posttest kindergarten) $F(3, 80) = 499.61, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.86$ indicating that students scores increased significantly from the fall pretest ($M = 8.94, SD = 11.52$) to the spring posttest ($M = 39.69, SD = 14.47$). Just as with the letter naming fluency screen, an increase in scores was an anticipated result, and it was reassuring to see significant increases in all groups. Based on the results over time for both the letter naming and letter sound fluency screens, the research district can have some confidence in the effectiveness of its reading program in the kindergarten grade.

Attendance

Student attendance was recorded throughout the school year using the research district's student information management system, PowerSchool. Absences were noted to the half-day. Absences for the entire school year were noted and analyzed.

In the research area of attendance, there was no significant main effect for group. The amount of school days missed by study participants did not appear to be a factor of group membership. All students, regardless of their study group, missed similar amounts of school. Interestingly, non-resident students not eligible for the free or reduced price

lunch program missed the least amount of school despite traveling to school from outside district boundaries.

Discussion

Early Literacy Achievement

Literacy and reading skills are essential to a child's academic success. Research has shown children that are successful in reading are much more likely to experience success in other academic areas (Kim et al., 2010; Sloat, Beswick, & Willms, 2007). It is also known that kindergarten is a critical school year for children to develop early and emergent literacy skills (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). This study looked at two aspects of early literacy skill development over the course of study participants' kindergarten year, letter naming fluency and letter sound fluency. Both of these skill sets have been shown to predict success in later reading.

All students in all study groups made significant progress in letter naming fluency and letter sound fluency over the course of their kindergarten year. The research district should be encouraged with these results as they demonstrate the kindergarten reading and literacy curriculum and instruction is effective. The district should, however, monitor the achievement of students of low socioeconomic background to ensure this group continues to achieve at the same levels as their middle class peers. While these students made significant progress, their achievement was slightly below that of the students not eligible for participation in the free or reduced lunch price program. There is a large body of research showing the achievement of disadvantaged students lags behind that of economically advantaged students. It is essential for the research district to monitor potential developments of achievement gaps.

School Choice and Early Literacy Achievement

This research study analyzed the early literacy achievement of non-resident students participating in a school choice program in comparison to their resident peers. The school choice program in which the non-resident students participated is known in Nebraska as the Learning Community Open Enrollment Program, and the 2010-11 school year was the first implementation year for this program.

School choice is often seen as a possible solution to unequal access to quality education. It is believed that by allowing parents to choose their child's school, that child is more likely to experience high quality effective instruction. This study showed that students, regardless of their residency status, made significant gains in the measured early literacy skills. This finding should encourage the research district as it appears to be delivering effective curriculum and instruction to all students. Parents choosing the research district for their children, based on the results of this study, can be assured their children are making significant growth in the area of early literacy. The research district should continue to monitor the performance of non-resident students to be sure no gap in achievement develops.

Attendance

Absenteeism has been identified as a common problem among poor students (Jensen, 2009). This can be the result of transportation issues, health issues, family care, or negative attitudes towards school. This study looked at the attendance patterns to determine if a difference existed among the student participants based on their grouping. It was positive to see that there were no significant differences in the attendance of students in the four study groups. This was somewhat surprising as it was anticipated

there would perhaps be higher rates of absenteeism in students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Because absenteeism is the factor most correlated with dropout rates, the research district must be persistent in monitoring students' attendance and provide for early intervention if a problem arises (Jensen, 2009).

Recommendations for Further Research

School choice appears to be one way for disadvantaged students to access high quality effective schools. Researchers have just begun to link school choice and student achievement, and there is much work to be done. Existing research tends to focus on school choice migration patterns and program participation rates. If school choice is to be a solution for educational inequalities, the education community as well as policy makers must know that school choice is truly providing positive educational experiences for all participants. To know this, more research must be done to establish a relationship between choice programs and academic achievement.

In addition, attendance must be a part of the research in school choice. Because poor attendance can have devastating effects on achievement, educators must be sure all students are attending school regardless of their residency status. While this study did not do so, it would be interesting to examine attendance patterns in comparison with student achievement, particularly at the kindergarten level. Kindergarten is a pivotal year for the development of early literacy skills, and missing even small amounts of school could impact this.

Summary

Public education is a right for all students regardless of their background. As long as there are inequalities in educational opportunities, the education community will continue

its search for a solution. School choice appears to be one viable option. Although riddled with complications, school choice programs have a great deal to offer students. Future research and policy should focus on providing quality schools for all children.

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