

Planting the Seeds of College and Career Readiness in Preschool

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Topic of the Study

The investigation explores the implementation and challenges of introducing a structured framework to enhance college and career readiness at the preschool level. The mixed-methods authentic case study focuses on how the core beliefs of the No Excuses University (NEU) framework have influenced the participants and the culture of achievement at one nonprofit preschool.

Abstract

Many jobs require some type of post-secondary degree or specialized training beyond high school, therefore addressing college and career readiness concepts at an early age may influence young children's future success. The research site is non-profit preschool accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) which serves predominantly low-income families. The purpose of the study was to discover how the core beliefs of the *No Excuses University* (NEU) program have influenced awareness of post-secondary opportunities and prospects for educational achievement. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that fostering a culture of universal achievement in a preschool setting can enhance young students' and their families' awareness of future educational opportunities, increase communication regarding long-term post-secondary goals, and support the development of a positive future story. Conclusions drawn from this study indicate that implementing a structured framework that addresses a variety of educational opportunities can positively influence the child, their parents, members of the school faculty, and the local community. Strategies and effective approaches executed by the preschool include the use of powerful symbolism and multi-faceted collaboration. Some untold challenges to program implementation are discussed. The implications from this research study on early exposure to college and career readiness concepts are applicable to many fields of study.

History of the Presentation

- Informally presented preliminary research findings to the West Texas A&M Center for Learning Disabilities leadership team. Shared announcement of journal article publication on the COESS Facebook page. This will be the first poster presentation of the research findings beyond the JARC published journal article.
- Coneway, B., Hwang, S. K., Goodrich, J., Kim, L., & Egbert, E. (2020). "Planting the Seeds of College and Career Readiness in Preschool," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*, 11(1)
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Data Collection Methodology

Data was collected from the participants who were recruited using purposeful sampling. Participants were 18 preschool faculty/staff members, 37 parents, and 31 preschool students. All adult participants were recruited through email messages, announcements, notes, and responded electronically to questions through an online survey. Preschool students were asked to respond to survey questions in a face-to-face interview at the school after their parent gave permission for them. Data collection took over a semester to complete and yielded 86 completed responses.



Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that preschool is not too early to begin shaping students' identities for future success and developing the self-efficacy skills to seek out post-secondary opportunities to fit their unique interests and talents. This can be accomplished by creating a culture of college- and career-readiness; providing ongoing training and support for faculty, parents, and students; and addressing the ongoing challenges that occur when implementing this framework.

Findings

Adult Faculty/Staff and Parent Survey Analysis

- Overall, the faculty/staff members and parent participants perceived an increase in conversations about college with their children as shown in this comment: "One thing that I have seen personally is my own children talking about college. They never say "if" I go to college, they always say "when" I go to college" (Faculty/Staff Participant 8). One faculty member suggested that the NEU framework fits well with the school's motto by sharing, "[NEU] is a great fit with our motto of "Good Beginnings Never End" (Faculty/Staff Participant 11).
- 56.5% of parents believed knowledge about college- and career-readiness would be helpful for their child's success later in life. 72% of the parent participants responded that their children seemed to be more interested in going to college because of their participation in these activities. For example, parent participant 5 responded, "We talk about him going on to kindergarten and how each year he will learn different things"; while parent participant 3 described conversations with her son by saying, "We talk about what college he wants to attend to become a doctor".
- 53.8% of faculty/staff believed that NEU principles could help students value their personal strengths and validate how they might use their strengths in the future. Furthermore, 46.2% of the faculty/staff participants credited the NEU program with helping students learn that higher education is attainable and is one way they could achieve long-term goals.
- Regarding suggestions to improve the NEU program at the school, faculty/staff suggested more assistance in helping students achieve short-term academic goals, additional guidance in providing motivation and hope to students, and further information about different college or career choices. In general, 44.4% of faculty/staff members responded that the NEU program was a positive influence on the faculty/staff, and 33.3% agreed that the program provided a positive influence on their children. Overall, 77.7% of the faculty/staff participants believed the NEU approach has helped create a positive school culture that promotes college- and career-readiness.

Student Survey Analysis

- 75% of students responded positively to a question about college and 70.8% of the child participants said they were interested in going to college. Examples of their responses included "Going to college is cool" and "I think I am going to do it!" (Selected child participants).
- Most student participants agreed that going to college would offer some benefit to their life, including making money (32.5%), developing knowledge and skills (22.5%), and fostering friendships (12.5%). About 45% of students responded that their teacher encouraged them to go to college and demonstrated a variety of career choices for what they would like to become when they grow up such as a firefighter, police officer, doctor, veterinarian, or teacher. 70.9% of students responded that their family members had gone to college or graduated from college.

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