

How supporting preschool teachers could reduce the “fade out” effect

Small investments in quality improvement can produce long-term benefits

by [Jack Graham](#)
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It's well-established that quality preschool can boost child outcomes. By [improving](#) children's cognitive and physical development during this critical period before the age of six, pre-primary education has been linked to [better outcomes](#) in education, health and employment.

Ensuring the *quality* of pre-primary education is vital in making sure that the results last. Many interventions to improve child outcomes have “[faded out](#)” when children reach school – meaning the gap in achievement closed between those who received the intervention and those who didn't. Researchers, therefore, are trying to understand which changes to preschool quality are effective in achieving lasting results.

A recent [longitudinal study](#) published in *Child Development* may hold some answers. The study evaluated child outcomes from the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP) in 2004 and 2005, which helped teachers to improve their classroom management skills and to reduce their stress. Years later, the intervention was found to boost the children's high school grades.

So how did the intervention work, and what lessons does it hold for improving preschool education?

From behaviour to grades

“The core focus of CSRP was on teacher professional development,” explained [Dana McCoy](#), an assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who led the study. The interventions took place in high-crime, high-poverty neighbourhoods in Chicago, in Head Start centres – which provide early education for low-income families in the United States.

“Teachers received a course on how to use positive disciplinary strategies in their classroom, as well as how to manage their own experiences of stress,” McCoy said. This took place in five six-hour professional development sessions.

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Teachers also received weekly in-class coaching from a master's level mental health consultant, to

help them implement what they had learned in the classroom. Meanwhile, consultants provided regular, one-one-one behaviour support for selected children who were difficult to manage.

The study found that improving the classroom environment led to an early improvement in the children's basic preacademic skills, including vocabulary and maths, as well as their self-regulation skills. This early academic boost then led to better student grades in high school – approximately one-quarter of a letter grade. Gains in early maths skills were also the biggest predictor of better executive function in high school.

“Even though the content of the professional development did not target academic content,” McCoy explained, “this suggests that efforts to improve behaviour management and to reduce teacher stress in preschool can have downstream consequences for instructional quality and academic performance.”

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This has important practical implications for those looking to improve long-term education outcomes. “Our results highlight the importance of creating a positive, warm, and responsive classroom environment,” said McCoy, “for supporting both social-emotional and learning outcomes.”

What does this tell us?

Although CSRP was targeted at particular high-need neighbourhoods, where children have the most to gain, McCoy argues programs like this could be useful universally. “We know that improving preschool quality is an ongoing challenge across the socioeconomic spectrum,” she said. Scaling up such projects also wouldn't be too difficult. While there are costs involved due to the expertise needed, such as mental health consultants, CSRP was a relatively short, inexpensive intervention.

“This work represents a first step in unpacking the mechanisms that underlie effective preschool programming,” McCoy explained. “Small investments in quality improvement can in fact produce long-term benefits.”

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