

Tulsa Educare RCT Follow-Up Study

Do the impacts of a high-quality early childhood education program starting in infancy persist through elementary school? The Tulsa Educare Follow-up Study provides some answers.



The Question:

Although numerous studies show that high-quality early care and education (ECE) can boost development and learning for all young children, some recent high-visibility studies have reported that early gains found during ECE attendance did not continue or sustain into later years. Instead, these studies report fade out, meaning the performance of children who did and did not attend high-quality ECE converge or look similar by the early elementary grades. The Tulsa Educare Follow-up Study contributes information to this current controversy by asking the question if the early gains shown by Tulsa Educare children when they were infants and preschoolers persisted or faded out as they progressed through elementary school.

The Program – Tulsa Educare:

Educare is a comprehensive early childhood program designed to facilitate development and learning of infants, toddlers, and preschool children who are growing up in poverty. Educare schools meet the federal Head Start and Early Head Start performance standards and go beyond them by including a variety of enhancements such as year-round, full-day services; ongoing embedded professional

development; family support staff with limited caseloads and Bachelor's-level training; a research-program partnership with local program evaluators who provide Educare with data to tailor continuous improvement planning. In 2010, when the study began, Tulsa Educare enrolled 200 children and offered 8 multiage infant/toddler rooms, each serving 8 infants/toddlers (total of 64 infants/toddlers), and 8 multiage preschool rooms serving 17 3- and 4-year-olds each (total of 136 children). The daily classroom practices and curriculum are based in developmentally appropriate practices as defined by the larger ECE field.

The Study:

The Tulsa Educare Follow-up Study involved 75 children who were randomly assigned to one of two groups at 19 months of age or younger. The 37 children in the treatment group attended Tulsa Educare as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers; and the 38 control group children experienced a range of other family-selected early care and education options available in Tulsa at the time. The ECEI followed both groups of these children through the end of Grade 3 to track their early academic performance, executive functioning, and social emotional development.

The Findings:

From kindergarten through Grade 3, children who attended Tulsa Educare demonstrated higher skills in letter and word identification, vocabulary, oral comprehension, and math than control group children, even after accounting for child/family characteristics and classroom quality. Results for executive functioning were mixed, with children in the treatment group showing higher skills on one of the two measures of executive function. No group differences were found for social-emotional skills. Overall, the results showed the boost in early academics found when the Tulsa Educare children were infants and preschoolers continued through Grade 3.



The Contribution:

Few studies start as early or last as long as this study—spanning infancy through Grade 3. Another unique feature is the study design that randomly assigned the children to the two groups—this limits explanation of the findings to the ECE program. Thus, this study is uniquely positioned to answer questions about the persistence or fading out of early gains.

Overall, these results suggest the high-quality ECE starting in infancy prompted early academic gains that persisted through Grade 3. The two groups did not demonstrate differential growth from K to Grade 3—the Tulsa Educare children’s growth did not slow, or fade and the control group did not catch up. Instead, the Tulsa Educare children entered K better positioned in academic skills, and that initial boost maintained over the elementary grades.

The Implications:

Relative to policy and practice, this study shows that high-quality center-based ECE starting prior to age two can produce robust, sustained academic benefits through Grade 3. Although results were obtained in one city, Tulsa, the program used, Educare, is currently operational in 25 sites across the U.S. Given that these Educare schools operate as a network with common goals and practices, it is expected that these results could be repeated across these programs and similar group ECE programs implementing a contemporary research-based approach. In this context, it is worth repeating that Educare schools use Early Head Start and Head Start standards and funding as their foundations. Thus, we have an existing structure and research support that positions this country to deliver on the promise of ECE for our children and families. Investments are needed to offer more children high-quality ECE services.

To read full article:

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