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ABSTRACT

This report presents the current status of an ongoing qualitative case study of the implementation of the High Scope Curriculum in the preschool readiness program at one elementary school in Gordon County, Georgia. This program, provided for all 4-year-olds, includes home visits by a family services coordinator, parent involvement opportunities, and a center-based preschool program. The short-term goal of the study was to increase teaching staff effectiveness through a collaboration action research project tracking student progress through the year. The long-term goal is to monitor program effectiveness and assess level of success in program graduates. The study used a phenomenological perspective to better understand the meaning of teachers' experiences. The research team consisted of the primary teacher and her assistant, with a university professor who facilitated the project. Data sources included: (1) observations and field notes of teachers, parents, and students; (2) audiotapes of meetings and interviews; (3) surveys; (4) student portfolios; and (5) personal logs from teachers and university collaborator. Teachers' logs conveyed their perceptions of the ongoing High Scope training and the development of collaborative action research questions. Surveys of 40 teachers attending High Scope training indicated that there were benefits for the teachers and their students. Children's progress will be examined using the High Scope Child Observation Record, with follow-up to begin as children move through elementary school. (KDFB)

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High Scope Curriculum

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Collaborative Action Research: The High Scope Curriculum  
For Georgia Public Preschools

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## **Collaborative Action Research: The High Scope Curriculum**

### **For Georgia Public Preschools**

A social demand has recently emerged in the form of calls for excellence in teaching, emphasizing the critical need for teachers to be effective in meeting the challenge of educating students. This demand has resulted in a surge of interest in a return to the basics with stress being placed on student achievement. While this newly found or cyclical interest in education is desirable, not all of its effects are noteworthy.

#### **Rationale**

Currently, over one-third of America's youth drop out of school. Although the demand for excellence in education cannot be accused of causing the dropout crisis in our schools, it is being criticized for putting more students into the category of being "at risk" of dropping out of school. The demand for higher achievement by students has resulted in upgrading standards. However, many school systems have failed to provide the much needed assistance and support to aid low achieving students in attaining the more stringent scholastic goals as well as keeping standards high for middle and upper level students. Consequently, youth failing to meet higher academic standards are placed in jeopardy of failing and eventually dropping out of school. This concern for teacher effectiveness and student achievement has resulted in staff development, in-service, and other related teacher programs which have been implemented to increase teacher effectiveness. The cost and time spent on these programs is considerable and the positive

effects on teacher teaching practices are questionable. Many separate programs have been implemented that address student problems at different grade levels and yet overall effectiveness on student achievement is questionable. Are staff development programs really effective in improving teacher effectiveness? Can these programs be justified in light of their cost? How can we effectively address the needs of students entering school for the first time in order to decrease the percentage of drop-outs? What can be done to insure more successful student learners throughout their school experience?

In an effort to curb the negative repercussions resulting from public demands for excellence, educators are beginning to seek ways of reducing the dropout rate and continual low academic achievement of students through early preventative programs geared at developing a positive orientation to school. The Georgia Legislature has encouraged the counties of Georgia to implement a program within the school system that addresses the developmental needs of four year old children, which should in turn lay a firmer school readiness foundation. This program was originally implemented for "at-risk" four year old children only, but now will be offered to all four year old children in counties that choose to implement this program during the 1995-96 school year. The counties have a choice of three curriculums; Montisorri, Creative Curriculum, and the High/Scope Curriculum. The program which has been adopted by Gordon County and will be the focus of this study is the High/Scope Curriculum. Some counties are refusing to implement a preschool program for various reasons. Others are implementing a

program with high anticipation of increasing the success of incoming kindergartners.

Parents, politicians, and educators alike have placed the curriculum under scrutiny. Will it really be worth the time, effort, and cost. Will four year old children substantially benefit from this program?

### Project Goals

The short term goals of this study will be to increase teacher and assistant teacher effectiveness within this program through a collaborative action research project that tracks student progress through the year. The long term goal of this study will be to monitor the effectiveness of this program over an extended period, and to assess the level of overall success in graduates from this program.

### Definition Of Terms

Action Research: There are a variety of definitions for action research and the same process is referred to by a variety of terms (i.e. teacher research, teacher inquiry, participatory research, classroom inquiry), but for the purposes of this study "action research" refers to research conducted in a classroom setting and involving the teacher and students native to that particular setting.

Collaborative Action Research: The addition of the word "collaborative" to action research implies, again for the purposes of this study since there are a variety of definitions, that the teacher is provided assistance from outside sources to help with the design and implementation of the research. Assistance for this study came from two main sources, university personnel (research professors and graduate assistants) and the teacher team.

The research in its simplest form, involves the identification of an issue to be researched by the participants, the formation of a plan of "action" in which to resolve the issue, the collection of data in various forms to substantiate the affects of the action, and reflection upon the results of the action. The cycle may be repeated, using the information gained to alter the issue to be researched.

### Theory and Methodology

The phenomenological perspective that was used in this study enables the researchers to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations. Phenomenological inquiry begins with "silence." This silence is an attempt to grasp what it is they are studying. What phenomenologists emphasize, then, is the subjective aspects of people's behavior. They attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects in order to understand how and what meaning they "construct" around events in their daily lives. Phenomenologists believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available to each of us through interacting with others, and that it is the meaning of our "experiences" that constitute reality. Reality, epistemology, and understanding, consequently, are "socially constructed." Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations. Reality comes to be understood to human beings only in the form in which it is perceived. As a qualitative researcher, I emphasize subjective thinking because, as I see it, the world is dominated by we who live

in our imaginations, a world where the settings are more symbolic than concrete. It is that world within the preschool setting that I hope to uncover.

### Study Design

The design of this ongoing study is that of a qualitative case study. Through inductive inquiry, the researcher intends to access teacher effectiveness in one case and shed light on the implementation of a new, state-supported program. The research questions involved, the need for control in the program, and the desire for long term involvement with this program were considered when deciding on the research method. The "bonding" or lack of "bonding" of teachers and assistant teachers implementing a new program to preschool students made for a tremendous source of qualitative data. Unlike experimental, survey, or historical research, case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis, but with the help of university personnel, every attempt was made and continues to be made to follow established guidelines and proven procedures. Since this study focuses on a case that is "qualitative" in nature, data gathering and analysis techniques characteristic of qualitative research were emphasized. The decision to focus on qualitative case study stems from the fact that I was interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing.

The researcher was the primary teacher with her assistant teacher who constituted the "team" that would collect the majority of data in this study directly from the

classroom environment. The university researcher facilitated the project, observed the program from his perspective, and helped to keep the research consistent and unbiased. The general design of this study is best represented by a funnel. The start of the study is the wide end, where we began with good questions that were not too specific. Then we looked for answers that might show us how to proceed and what might be feasible to pursue. We collected data, reviewing and reflecting as the project progressed, and made decisions about where the data was leading us. As a group, we decided how to distribute our time, where to collect data, who to interview, and what to explore in depth. We put aside old ideas and plans that weren't working, and developed new ones. We continually modified the design and chose procedures as we learned more about the topics we were studying. In time, we made specific decisions on what aspects of the setting, subjects, and data sources we would examine. The work developed a focus, the data collection and research activities narrowed, and the broad exploratory beginnings moved in a more concise direction, like the narrow end of the funnel.

Data were triangulated through different data sources and collectors. Data were collected by the teacher-researcher, her assistant teacher, and the university collaborator. The data sources were as follows: (1) observations (including field notes) of teachers, parents, and students, (2) audio tapes of meetings and interviews, (3) surveys, (4) student portfolios, (5) personal logs from teachers and the university collaborator.

This study did have some negative aspects as well. The study required a

commitment of extra time from the teachers and assistant teachers for data collection, reflection, meetings, and writing. Secondly, this program is new to the Georgia school system, but research and results in other schools has been favorable. Previous research results are limited to one northern school and may or may not be relevant to this case study. However, knowledge gleaned from this ongoing project should help educators throughout the state and country better understand the need of public preschool education, its implementation, and its affect on higher level school success for students. The study will also expand our current knowledge in collaborative action research and its effectiveness in improving teacher and assistant teacher planning and instruction. Most action research studies have involved single teachers. Recently there have been action research studies on teacher teams at the middle school level, but very little has been done on teacher and assistant teacher teams at the primary level.

### Setting

The project took place at Red Bud Elementary, one of five elementary schools located in Gordon County, Georgia. The major employers of this community are the carpet mills which are so prevalent in the area since Dalton, GA (the carpet capitol of the world) is less then twenty minutes from the community. Several housing developments have emerged in recent years which have contributed to an increase of the student population at Red Bud Elementary.

Five years ago, Red Bud was a comprehensive school that was housed in three

buildings. Those three buildings remain today. The preschool is housed in one of the buildings while the rest of the elementary is housed in the two remaining buildings. We have four classes, two movement rooms, one large and one small workroom, three nap rooms, a pre-school playground, and a dining room that holds two classes at a time. Extra room was available so we used it, but this is not the norm for pre-schools in the state of Georgia. Many of Georgia's new pre-schools are housed in trailers, some with and some without bathrooms facilities, while others are in classrooms that are on the same hall as higher academic grades.

#### Background on the Georgia preschool program.

The program was originally developed for "At Risk" four year old students (those at risk of failing at the elementary level) to provide readiness education. In Gordon County, the program included home visits by a family services coordinators and parent education nights, as well as the preschool itself. During the summer of 1995, Governor Zell Miller encouraged every county in the state of Georgia to provide pre-school education to every four year old. Very few counties chose to provide preschool education to every four year old because of the expense involved in such an undertaking. The Georgia lottery paid first year teacher salaries and materials, but did not include funding for other extras such as classrooms, salaries for teachers who had one or more years of public school teaching, and teacher benefits. Gordon county was one of the few counties that chose to fully implement the program, with programs housed in all five

elementary schools. Since Red Bud Elementary, the school involved in this study, housed the at-risk preschool program during the prior year, it was well stocked with furniture and supplies.

Three different program options were available for the counties to choose from: Montisorri, Creative Curriculum, and The High/Scope Curriculum. The Creative Curriculum provided a series of activities with no training, and while Montisorri and High/Scope both provided training, Gordon County chose the High/Scope Curriculum. According to Gordon County Board of Education Liaison for Preschool and Elementary Curriculum Coordinator, the Georgia Dept. Of Education sponsored a High/Scope training program (Preschool Lead Teacher Training Program) for all of the certified teachers in Georgia that were to teach the High/Scope curriculum (not the paraprofessionals). The training was contracted with the Georgia Academy, a private/public organization located in Atlanta, that designs and delivers training programs.

#### High/Scope background

The High/Scope Educational Approach began in Ypsilanti, Michigan originally for At-Risk preschool children in the late 1960's to provide an educational program that would increase their chances for school success. It is an open-framework instructional model derived from child development theory. Long term studies have found that children who spent two preschool years in a developmentally appropriate active learning environment had a greater chance for success in life than those taught in a traditional

preschool (Schweinhart, Barnes, Weikart, Barnett, & Epstein, 1993). "Children in High/Scope programs out score those in comparison programs on measures of emotional, social, cognitive, and motor development ( The consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983)." With the success of the original Perry Preschool Project, High/Scope began a publication program to document the approach so that it could be duplicated in other locations. The High/Scope Foundation continues to provide training programs for educators working with children through age eight internationally.

### Findings

#### High/Scope process

*"When the school requires that a student's efforts come from the student instead of being imposed, and that his intelligence undertake authentic work instead of accepting pre-digested knowledge from the outside, it is simply asking that all the laws of all intelligence be respected."*

- Jean Piaget

I, Penelope, began teaching the High/Scope curriculum in the fall of 1995, which coincided with the beginning of this collaborative action research project. My journal from 9/6/95 reads, "We are less than one month into the school year, yet I do believe that I have heard the following phrases several times a day, every day since my first day teaching here at Red Bud: (In reference to an idea expressed to colleagues in the pre-K building for the children to work on during Small Group) "That's High Scope!" or "That won't work, that's not High Scope." (9/14/95) "I'm excited about teaching this High

Scope Curriculum. When I first started teaching, I originally adopted concepts of learning in the style of Bruner, Piaget, and the British Free Schools of the 70's. With this new High/Scope curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for the child, and uses anecdotal records for assessment, I feel like I have come full circle. I have read some things on High Scope, yet there are a lot of blank spaces in my thinking. I can't wait until my first day of High Scope training."

At that particular point in the year, I needed more information, and as the year progressed, I got it. Four separate weeks of training were provided throughout the year so we were able to implement what we had learned and then discuss the process at our next training session. Active Learning is the core of this educational approach. It provides environmental support for the learner. Through active learning, the teaching adult puts her/himself at the physical level of the child to watch what materials the child uses and how they use them. The adult listens to what the learner says and asks meaningful questions related to what the learner is saying and doing. The adult encourages the learner to answer their questions and refer to each other for problem solving. The adult respects the learners developmental abilities, and looks for ways to expand on the learner's progress.

High/Scope's preschool education approach is an open-framework educational approach that organizes the children's and teacher's environment, daily routine, and adult/child interactions. This framework provides a systematic approach for planning,

organizing, carrying through, and assessing daily responsibilities. An important part of the High/Scope Curriculum is Planning Time, Work Time, and Recall. This part of the High/Scope curriculum is when children plan what they would like to do (Planning Time), carry out their intentions through play, solving problems, sorting, classifying and organizing materials and projects (Work Time), and recall and reflect on what they did during work time (Recall). Work time is an important part of the school day because it is a time when “children carry out a purposeful series of actions they have thought about and described during planning time....children play with purpose and concentration, solve problems they encounter, and engage in the High/Scope Key Experiences (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995).”

### Action Research Questions

During the summer before the school year began, we developed collaborative action research questions based on the small amount of information we had at the time.

The following questions were the result of our early meetings:

- 1.) Are curriculum programs really effective in improving teacher/student effectiveness?
- 2.) Can these programs be justified in light of their cost?
- 3.) Do these programs effectively address the needs of students entering school for the first time in order to decrease the percentage of drop-outs?

By the time the school year had begun, we had added the following two questions to

narrow the scope of the study to High/Scope curriculum:

- 4.) Will High/Scope training be worth the time, effort, and cost?
- 5.) Will four year old children in Georgia substantially benefit from this program?

The Collaborative Action research project was something I, Penelope, chose to do for my professional growth. The purpose of doing this was to assist me through the transitional year while helping me develop as a teacher. I felt that the benefits gained from asking questions about my practice, documenting student's work and comments, fellow teacher's comments and observations, and compiling a personal journal would help my professional growth regardless of what research questions I came up with. Once I began collecting data related to the research questions, I discovered that High/Scope is a philosophy, not just a curriculum style, and that the four weeks involved in training were necessary for the development of this philosophy.

(Journal Entry 10/31/95) "High/Scope doesn't come with a set of directions, it's a philosophy that needs to become the teaching style of the teacher. This takes time and practice."

High/Scope training is designed to provide a week's worth of information with time to practice new techniques over a period of weeks before attending an additional week of training. The first week of training took place October 30 - November 4, 1995. Forty teachers attended the training who came from different counties in north Georgia. Thirteen out of the forty were first year teachers, two of which had day care experience,

three were in their second year of teaching, two had taught middle grades prior to this teaching experience, and one was a teaching assistant. The rest of the teachers' experience ranged from four to nineteen years.

I conducted a survey of these teachers on 12/1/95, and the majority of the teachers said that they felt comfortable with those areas of the High/Scope curriculum in which they had already received training. Key aspects of the applicable they mentioned were:

“Planning, review, child-centered”

“Small group, encouragement, work time”

“Plan, do, review”

“Planning, small group”

What would they change about High/Scope?

“Stronger discipline for extreme behavior problems”

“I think praise is great. You can praise and encourage.”

“Don't know yet”

“I don't know - I hope all the choices are right for the children.”

In a second survey, conducted after the last week of High/Scope training (3/1/96), I asked them how their philosophy of High/Scope had changed over the four week instructional period. The following are some of the teacher comments:

“Assessing the children was confusing, but the key experiences and COR Assessment (Child Observation Record) make more sense now than ABC type grading.”

"I still find myself praising my kids as opposed to encouraging them, but I really want to get better at it. I have praised my kids for years and now I understand why it is sometimes detrimental."

In my opinion, the cost and time spent on High/Scope training was high, but the benefits were tremendous for both the teachers and their students. We pre-K teachers who were trained in the High/Scope Curriculum in Georgia have not only developed a new curriculum, but a philosophy that is developmentally appropriate for Georgia's four year old students. In addition, the collaborative action research project helped me to document the process of learning the curriculum and affords me a valuable review and reflection resource.

Are we effectively addressing the needs of students entering school for the first time in order to decrease the percentage of drop-outs? Research from the Perry Preschool Project (1962-1967) forms the basis of current research on High/Scope. Findings indicate that there is a big difference between 27 year old adults that were involved in the Perry Preschool Project as preschoolers and those who were not. The study showed that, in the area of social responsibility, "one fifth as many preschool program [High/Scope] group members as no-preschool group members had been arrested five or more times ... one third as many in drug dealing ... four times as many preschool program members earned \$2,000 or more a month ... three-times as many preschool program group members as no-preschool program group members owned their own home ... three fourths as many

preschool program group members as no-preschool program group members received welfare assistance or other social services ... one third again as many preschool program group members as no-preschool program group members graduated from regular or adult high school or received GED certification [directly addresses our question] ... preschool program males had been married twice as long as no-preschool program males ... preschool program females had only about two thirds as many out of wedlock births as no-preschool program females (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995)."

In another study, three preschool curriculums were studied (Schweinhart, Weikart, and Larner, 1986). Both High/Scope and Nursery school instruction emphasized child initiated activities in which children pursued their own interests with the support of staff. The Direct Instruction approach focused on academics and rapid fire questions. The results of the follow-up study of these children at age 15 were significant. The delinquency findings of the Direct instruction students indicated 13 offences, the Nursery group had 7 offences, and the High/Scope group had 5 offences. Other findings were similar. In both research studies, children in the High/Scope program significantly outperformed their peers in the areas of initiative, social relations, motor development, and cognitive development. My experience with the curriculum would lead me to agree that the High/Scope preschool program should significantly increase the chance for future success in most four year old children.

Will four year old children in Georgia substantially benefit from this program?

This question will be saved for the next cycle of this ongoing study. Since the teachers involved in this project were not trained on the High/Scope COR Assessment (High/Scope Child Observation Record, 1992) until the end of January, 1996 and will not complete their first assessment until May of 1996, there was not enough data available to begin to answer this question. Follow-up studies will also begin next year as the first graduates of the program move through the elementary grades.

The following, however, are overall observations that I, Penelope, maintain about what was offered to the group of four year old students in this project. For the first time in the history of Gordon County, quality public preschool was offered to any four year old that wanted to be a part of the program. Along with this opportunity came the resources and funding that accompany public school education, in addition to state certified teachers.

Of the 27 students that cycled through this particular study group:

- 1.) All had access to the following resources that might be limited in non-public school preschool:
  - A. Books, media equipment, videos, filmstrips, records, tapes, computers and software from the media center.
  - B. Whole class lessons from the school guidance counselor.
  - C. A wide variety of well balanced breakfasts and lunches (of the 27, ten were on the free breakfast and lunch program).

D. A playground that was designed for preschoolers.

E. Access to projects that were funded with grant money and developed by Red Bud's gifted teacher, which included:

Materials from the Science Lab.

Red Bud's outdoor classroom including bird feeders, wren houses, bat houses, and a vegetable and flower garden.

F. Parent involvement programs and other services that were provided by our family services coordinator.

G. Twelve pentium computers and color printers will be installed in a preschool lab located next to the four classrooms in May of 1996.

This lab will include four programs that are highly recommended by the High/Scope Foundation.

2.) Three students have been identified with speech problems and are currently receiving speech therapy on an ongoing basis.

3.) Two students have been identified as ADHD. One is on medication. The other was referred to the local Association for Mental Health for ADHD counseling and other problems.

Opportunities, such as the ones listed above as well as the framework of the high quality curriculum that High/Scope provides should benefit the four year old children involved. Future collaborative action research cycles will document the process, and

provide us with details about the level of benefit. Finally, we emphasize that we believe the best outcomes of this type of professional development process are those who benefit most, the children. Better teachers provide better environments for our children just beginning their educational journey.

*When an object or environment is open to many interpretations and uses, the child holds the power to tell it what it is to be or do, rather than it giving the child some preconceived "correct" way to perceive or act.*

*-James Talbot and Joe. L. Frost*

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