"Having That Place to Just Be and Not Separated by What You Can Afford": A Case Study of Socioeconomic Integration at an Urban Preschool

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Abstract

Schools in the United States are highly segregated by socioeconomic group. Segregation is pervasive throughout all levels of the school system but particularly prevalent in early childhood environments. Increased racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in classrooms and schools has been shown to lead to positive developmental and social outcomes for all students. The current article presents a case study of one urban program's experience integrating its tuition-paying and Head Start students into a single cohesive program. The program's goals in undertaking this initiative were to enhance the sense of community within the program by providing equal access to resources and to promote positive child development for all students. Data was collected by examining student assessments, surveying parents, and interviewing program staff. Key takeaways from this program's experience include: (1) combining programs with complementary theories and providing high levels of support to teachers can help to create high quality, highly diverse classrooms; (2) programs must address potential issues with integration early and by engaging stakeholders in open, honest conversations; (3) fostering relationships between children in classrooms can be accomplished by embracing the diversity in the classroom, but more targeted efforts may be necessary to create a strong community of families.

Key Words: socioeconomic integration, diversity, case study, prekindergarten, Head Start, urban preschool, early childhood education, parental income

Introduction

Historically, early childhood education (ECE) in the United States has been inherently segregated, as access depends on families' ability to pay tuition for private preschools or to meet income eligibility requirements for public programs (Potter, 2016). Inequity in the quality of early learning environments creates a pipeline that siphons the most disadvantaged students into the most underresourced schools (Ayscue et al., 2016). Successful policies to decrease racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation in schools have shown that learning environments where students come from diverse backgrounds strengthen all students' academic and social skills well into high school by providing equitable access to resources and creating communities of students and families with diverse perspectives who can learn from one another (Feddes et al., 2009; Reid & Kagan, 2015; Schechter & Bye, 2007). In contrast, integration policies that fail to address systemic barriers for the most disadvantaged families tend to perpetuate racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation (Campbell et al., 2017). Despite an abundance of evidence indicating the benefits of early exposure to peers who come from diverse backgrounds, less understood is how ECE programs can implement successful integration policies to create classrooms that are economically, racially, and ethnically diverse. The current study presents a descriptive, mixed methods case study of one ECE program's internal assessment of socioeconomically integrating its prekindergarten (PreK) classrooms by merging Head Start and tuition paying students into a single program.

A Segregated Education System

In 2017, 40% of all children from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES)—approximately 10 million students across the United States—attended schools with poverty rates of 75% or higher (Boser & Baffour, 2017). ECE environments may be even more segregated than elementary or secondary schools; evidence suggests that ECE classrooms are twice as likely as K–12 classrooms to be 100% Black or Hispanic (Fram & Kim, 2012; Frankenberg, 2016; Greenberg & Monarrez, 2019). Given what is known about the negative influences of segregation on students' achievement, its pervasiveness through every level of the school system is concerning for families, practitioners, and researchers alike.

Much of the research on the topic of school segregation considers only the impact of racial/ethnic segregation or combines racial/ethnic and socioeconomic

segregation. However, some research suggests that the race/ethnicity and socioeconomic achievement gaps are both best explained by disparities in schools' average poverty rates, irrespective of schools' racial/ethnic makeup (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Reardon, 2016). Previous research investigating the influence of a school's average socioeconomic makeup on student achievement has indicated that the overall socioeconomic background of all students attending a school is more influential on students' achievement than any individual student or family characteristic (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Borman & Dowling, 2010; Reardon, 2016; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Overall, evidence suggests that low diversity in classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods is most detrimental to students in environments where low-SES and minority students are the majority of the student population, as these schools are most likely to be underfunded and underresourced (Angioloni & Ames, 2015; Flink et al., 2013).

In addition to inequities in school resources, peer interactions in classrooms are also an important factor in understanding the impact of diversity on students (Pettigrew, 2008; Reid, 2014; Reid & Kagan, 2015). As part of the income achievement gap, children from disadvantaged families tend to enter school with lower language and math skills than their more privileged peers (Reid, 2014). Interactions between children in the classroom may facilitate learning from each other through modeling of more advanced behaviors and language (Reid & Kagan, 2015). The role of peers may be particularly salient in preschool where students engage in more unstructured play, interacting directly with their peers (Gaias et al., 2018). Research suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds make significantly greater gains in language acquisition during preschool when they attend economically diverse classrooms (Schechter & Bye, 2007). These gains are further increased when children's classrooms are both economically and racially diverse (Reid, 2014).

Diverse learning environments do not only provide benefits to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While the research in this area is limited, what is available indicates that early exposure to peers from diverse backgrounds increases all students' social and cultural competencies, regardless of individual background (Garda, 2011). Integrated environments are likely particularly influential early in life, as negative out-group biases have been shown to develop by age five (Feddes et al., 2009; Frankenberg, 2016). The cognitive and academic abilities of all students may also be improved through increased diversity. Interacting with peers who have different ways of thinking can help students cognitively by increasing creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving abilities (Wells et al., 2016).

Policies to Reduce School Segregation

Local and national policies have been implemented to attempt to address the high levels of race and income segregation seen in schools across the country (Camera, 2019). A 2016 report by Potter et al. of the Century Foundation identified over 100 school districts serving 4.4 million students across the U.S. that had implemented some policy to attempt to reduce socioeconomic segregation within their schools. One of the most common types of policies implemented to combat school segregation falls under the label of school choice. Numerous studies have found that many school choice policies perpetuate current levels of segregation and may lead to even more economic and racial/ethnic segregation in schools (Bifulco et al., 2009; Koedel et al., 2009; Phillips et al., 2015; Saporito, 2003). For example, a report examining New York City public schools found that if no choice was available to families and all students attended their zoned public schools, schools across the city would actually see a slight decrease in levels of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation (Morse et al., 2018).

One reason school choice policies do not always increase school diversity is that they fail to adequately address barriers disadvantaged families face within school systems. In a study of 18 cities across the country with school choice policies, low-SES families were least likely to exercise choice when choosing a school for their children due to a lack of information about school choice from trusted sources (Campbell et al., 2017). Lack of information is not only an issue for disadvantaged families; parents from all backgrounds report concern about the lack of information provided to them regarding choosing a school for their child (Ayscue et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2017; Neild, 2005). Creating a strong community of parents with diverse backgrounds could be a potential avenue to alleviate this barrier with parents serving as trusted sources of information for one another (Ayscue et al., 2016).

Desegregation efforts to decrease inequality in schools have typically focused on older grades (Ayscue et al., 2016). However, gaps in achievement based on students' backgrounds can been seen as early as kindergarten (Reardon, 2016; Reid, 2012). School districts that have successfully used socioeconomic integration to create diverse schools and classrooms can be found all across the country in both urban and rural settings (Bazelon, 2008; Schwartz, 2012; Williams, 2012). Research on the outcomes of students from these districts indicates that socioeconomic integration can effectively reduce the income achievement gap in both language and math skills (Schechter & Bye, 2007; Schwartz, 2012). While informative, these findings concern elementary and high school students; less is currently known about integration and its effects on younger children.

The Current Study

Despite near consensus in the research literature on the benefits of providing economically integrated learning environments, less is known about what integration policies for ECE look like in practice. Of particular interest to this article is how programs can effectively create diverse communities of students and families, as well as the challenges that may occur through this process. Using data collected from parents, staff, and program leadership, this article provides a mixed methods, descriptive case study of a socioeconomic integration strategy at a preschool in New York City, including a description of the program's approach to integration, challenges the program faced throughout the process, and potential solutions to these challenges. Two questions guided the project's design, data collection, and analysis: (1) How were teachers, parents, and children impacted by integration? (2) What challenges related to integration arose throughout the year, and what solutions were implemented or could be implemented in the future?

Method

The Program

Located in a racially and economically diverse neighborhood in New York City, the preschool site of interest to the current study has been in operation since 2014. Prior to the 2018–19 school year, the program operated a tuition-based private preschool for infants to five-year-olds alongside a federally funded Head Start program for students of the same age. Despite being located within the same building, these programs had separate administrative models, staff, educational philosophies, and were housed on different floors. To combat this segregation, the program implemented an integration strategy for the 2018–19 school year which assigned students to classrooms regardless of their entry into the program as Head Start or tuition funded. All 72 four-year-old Universal PreK (UPK) students were placed into four classrooms, mixing students who were Head Start-eligible and tuition-paying together.

The impetus for the two programs to merge and create a cohesive, economically integrated program was a sense by leadership and staff that the segregation of ECE classrooms by family income did not align with the program's mission to ameliorate economic disparities in the community. The program embarked on this effort in order to achieve two main goals: (1) enhance the sense of community among children, families, and staff by providing equal access to resources and supports and reducing economic, linguistic, and administrative barriers for families; and (2) promote positive child development by providing an enriching and progressive learning environment for all students in its UPK classrooms.

Participants

Across the four UPK classrooms, 54 (75%) students were Head Start eligible, and 18 (25%) were tuition paying students. School was in session five days a week, and all students were at least full-day with some students participating in an extended day program. Demographic information was not collected at the individual classroom level, but program wide, 42.5% of students were Asian, 22.4% were White, 22.2% were Black, and 13% were Multiracial; 39.1% of students were Hispanic or Latino. Regarding home languages, 33.8% of families reported that their primary language is Chinese, 51.3% English, and 12.8% Spanish. Enrolled Head Start children needed to meet at least one of the following criteria per federal guidelines in order to be eligible: family lives in temporary housing, child is in foster care, family is receiving public assistance, or family income is below federal poverty guidelines. Prior to integration, yearly tuition was charged to private pay families based on a sliding scale, ranging from $15,000–$31,000 based on family income. In accordance with New York City's PreK for All initiative, regardless of previous enrollment, no PreK students were charged tuition for regular day services. Generally, tuition-based families represented shifting neighborhood demographics, while Head Start families represented groups who were long-time residents of the neighborhood.

In order to staff the new program, all current teachers in the Early Childhood Program were given the opportunity to apply for 13 teaching positions in the four integrated UPK classrooms for the 2018–19 school year. Teachers from across the organization were invited to "opt in" to the new integrated program using a standard application form which sought teacher's opinions on the value of integration and ideas for family engagement. The program director, who is also the third author, interviewed and conducted a classroom observation with each applicant before making final hiring decisions. Due to the high Chinese-speaking population in the school, leadership placed a particular emphasis on recruiting Chinese-speaking teachers and support staff. Applications were opened to the public with job postings shared with local universities and small businesses in the community. Ultimately, six former private preschool, four former Head Start, and three external teachers were hired.

The Process of Integration

The integration process described here represents the program's experience during the first year of a three-to-five year planned process to integrate the entire program. In order to make best use of program resources, the decision was made to start the first year of integration with four-year-old PreK classrooms and in subsequent years integrate younger classrooms. Many students in the PreK classrooms were continuing students from the program's preschool

classrooms. Like the rest of the program up to this point, younger classrooms were separated into students who were paying tuition and those enrolled in federally funded Head Start programs. In preparation for integration, the program director facilitated group tours, drop-in meetings, and "town hall" sessions for returning families. These sessions were used to emphasize the value of integration for all children, share information about the program's progressive teaching philosophy, and answer parent questions and concerns.

Program leadership worked with the organization's finance team to develop a standardized allocation formula for shared expenses based on the number of children receiving each funding source. Whereas in previous years access to resources had been restricted by funding source, this shared formula enabled expenses for professional development, classroom materials, and support staff to be easily shared and gave all families unrestricted access to program offerings and supports. Program leadership also worked with partners in city and federal government to gain approval for a "braided" funding model which funded increased social work and mental health supports, free extended day for Head Start eligible families with childcare needs, and salary equity for teachers.

Much planning and professional development was required so that Head Start compliance could be ensured while remaining faithful to the school's Reggio Emilia-inspired philosophy. The Reggio Emilia approach to ECE involves a child-driven, inquiry-based curriculum in which children are seen as active participants in constructing their own educational trajectory (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). It was determined that the Head Start Performance Standards, which emphasize differentiated instruction and nurturing environments, were compatible with this approach. Head Start also requires formal assessment of children's development at defined checkpoints throughout the year using an approved assessment system, which was new to the Reggio Emilia-inspired private preschool.

Teacher Preparation

Prior to the start of school, teachers assigned to the integrated classrooms attended two professional development retreats, consisting of four workshops that each addressed an area of priority for the program as detailed below. The retreats were held on two Saturdays in the month of August and ran for approximately five hours each. In addition to the retreats, teachers had four days of professional development and planning time in the week before school started.

1. *Emergent curriculum and the role of assessment.* Teachers in the integrated classrooms were coming from both private and Head Start classrooms and held potentially divergent teaching philosophies. In order to merge these perspectives, program leadership shared examples of teachers successfully

embedding PreK learning concepts in authentic and meaningful long-term project work inspired by children's questions, theories, and prior knowledge.
2. *Supporting social–emotional development and viewing children in context*. With a focus on children's mental health and the role of family systems in children's social–emotional development, this retreat encouraged teachers to consider how the environments children experience outside of school impact their functioning at school as well and discussed strategies for embedding social–emotional learning in classroom transitions, routines, and caregiving rituals.
3. *Nurturing bilingual learners and families*. This workshop taught teachers, particularly those who did not speak a second language, how to transcend immersion-based models of language development by incorporating teaching materials in other languages and shared strategies for encouraging home language development and facilitating parent communication (see the Appendix for a resource on classroom strategies provided to teachers).
4. *Anti-bias education.* An independent partner organization was invited to give this workshop that focused on implementing a social justice and antiracism lens in the classroom and invited staff at all levels to consider how systems of bias and exclusion manifest in the school setting.

The goal of the workshops was to ensure that all teachers felt supported in all areas of their classroom practices. Each of the above workshops contributed meaningfully throughout teachers' experiences in the classroom.

Research Materials and Procedure

The organization's internal evaluation team was involved throughout the school year in order to document the process of economic integration. The team employed a mixed methods approach, collecting data from teacher focus groups, child assessment, and a parent survey.

Teacher Focus Groups

Two focus groups of one hour each were conducted by the second author with a total of eight UPK teachers in the spring of 2019. The first focus group included 5 teachers from multiple classrooms and discussed how teachers prepared to teach in an integrated classroom, how the integrated classroom differed from previous teaching experiences, successes and challenges that arose across the year, and recommendations for how to improve the process in the future. Teachers were also asked about their impressions of their students' language development and behavior with the classroom. The second focus group was conducted with three teachers from one classroom that had intentionally focused on incorporating multiples languages into everyday instruction. The questions in this second focus group aimed to understand how

children's various home languages played a role in the integration process. In both groups, the facilitator made clear that what teachers said was confidential and that the information would be primarily used to make improvements to the program in the future.

Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG)

Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) is an ongoing, observation-based teacher evaluation system designed for use with children from infancy to kindergarten and widely used in Head Start programs (Kim et al., 2013). Teachers observe and assess children throughout the school year and enter the information they gather about each child and domain into the instrument at three checkpoints throughout the year. The first checkpoint occurred in late November, the second in early March, and the third in late May. TSG domains include: social–emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics. Teachers rate children on each of these domains on a scale of 0 (*not yet accomplished)* to 9 (*shows progress beyond expectations*). For many of the teachers involved in the integrated UPK program, particularly those who previously taught in the tuition-funded-only classrooms, the 2018–19 school year was their first experience using the TSG assessment tool. In the week prior to school opening, the program's Assessment Coordinator led a four-hour orientation for all teachers on using TSG in a Reggio Emilia-inspired classroom.

Parent Survey

At the end of the program year, parents were asked to complete a survey about their and their children's experience in an integrated classroom over the course of the previous year. The survey consisted of three open-ended questions asking parents to describe (1) their children's experience in a socioeconomically integrated program, (2) their families' experience in the program, and (3) what, if anything, could be done to improve that experience in future school years. The survey was available in Chinese, English, and Spanish. Program staff approached parents while they were dropping their child off and explained the purpose of the survey to them; parents were then able to take the survey on an iPad provided by the program staff. The English version of the survey was also available through a link emailed to all parents. Of parents, 28 (approximately 39% of families enrolled in the program) completed full surveys.

Data Analysis

Two guiding questions for the assessment of integration were articulated by the program directors and the research team: (1) How were teachers, parents, and children impacted by integration? (2) What challenges arose throughout the year, and what solutions were implemented or could be implemented in

the future? For this descriptive single case study, data analysis methods were informed by two seminal texts in in case study research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017), as well as coding methods from qualitative content analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2010) to build a narrative that was representative of teachers' and families' experiences. Following collection of data from all three sources, the first and second author reviewed the qualitative responses from the teacher focus groups and parent surveys. Through a process of applying codes to small segments of the transcripts, similar constructs within these responses were identified and defined. Constructs related to the guiding questions identified during coding emerged as themes through further discussion between the research team and reexamination of transcripts.

In addition to qualitative data from the focus groups and parent surveys, quantitative assessment results were also included to supplement the teacher and parent reports about children's experiences. The child assessment data from TSG was first analyzed to understand how teachers adapted to using an assessment system that some teachers had extensive experience with and others were using for the first time. This was accomplished by comparing assessment data from the 2018–19 school year to data from the 2017–18 school year, when only Head Start students were assessed using TSG. If the assessment data was confirmed to be used in a manner consistent with previous years' data, it would then be used to determine how children's development was impacted by integration. Finally, the research team engaged the two program directors, one of whom is the third author, in multiple discussions about the findings to determine whether the conclusions were reflective of their experience and to provide important context to the results.

Positionality

The authors are all employed by the same nonprofit organization, dedicated to providing the community with services that help individuals and families overcome social barriers. Part of this strategy is to provide children with high quality education and adult family members with services such as parenting classes, employment services, college guidance, and ESOL classes. The authors employ a strengths-based research approach that presupposes all families should have access to services to help them build upon the strengths inherent in every person. The goal of this research project is to effectively tell the story of the program's teachers and families by authentically reporting their experiences in a socioeconomically integrated program. All three authors are White, hold socially liberal political perspectives, are between 25–35 years old, and come from middle to upper class backgrounds. Each has worked in various educational settings, focusing on early childhood. These characteristics and

prior experiences may have impacted the study design and interpretation of the results. The second author, who conducted the teacher focus groups, was known to some of the teachers in his role as head of the research and evaluation team. This author is not connected to teachers within the agency's organizational chart, does not supervise any educational staff, and has no influence in staff-related decision-making within the early childhood program. In an effort to protect anonymity, teachers had the opportunity to review focus group transcripts and a draft of the evaluation report prior to it being shared with program leadership. In an effort to assess potential influences of the authors' positionality on interpretation of findings, the report was shared with a range of stakeholders both internal external to the agency—including researchers, practitioners, and policy analysts.

Results

Teaching Practices

A fundamental step in the integration process was ensuring high quality and welcoming environments that aimed to foster a positive community for students and their families. In the teacher focus group, teachers were asked about their impressions of the quality of the classrooms and instruction for students. Teachers felt that "the quality of the classroom was really high," reflecting on significant efforts to maintain high standards of practice through observations, team meetings, professional development, and regular reporting to administration. Teachers also reported hearing from parents that their children's classrooms were more welcoming and had more resources than previous years.

Integration provided a setting for students of different cultural and economic backgrounds to interact. One of the most successful teaching practices for successful integration was embracing diversity in the classroom. This primarily occurred through teachers encouraging the use of students' home language in addition to English. Languages spoken across the UPK classrooms by students and teachers throughout the year included Chinese, Dutch, English, Hebrew, and Spanish. One teacher noted the positive influence this multilingual context had on the classroom community:

> Our class doesn't feel like a weird monoculture like it did the past few years when there was little or no diversity. It felt so weird before, teaching in a little bubble in this neighborhood that is so incredibly diverse.

Another teacher identified language use as a catalyst for fostering community in the classroom:

> Once we dug into the work on languages, we really saw integration. Kids who came from [tuition-based] preschool all came from one class,

> so that was one group of friends. Languages helped them branch out and make new friends. In the beginning of the year when we weren't so focused on language, there were small groups of friends who only played with each other.

All classrooms incorporated some multilingual classroom practices, though the extent of this use varied across classrooms. In one classroom, teachers frequently used their Chinese and Spanish language skills and encouraged students to ask questions and speak to each other in their language of preference. Teachers used morning meetings as a setting to introduce new concepts and develop routines in Chinese. Other practices included creating visuals of words in multiple languages, providing direct translations, and regularly infusing multiple languages into classroom dialogue. Teachers were intentional about using multiple languages throughout the course of the year and wanted to make sure students felt comfortable using their own language in the classroom, noting that it provided students "permission to be who you are." Though there was concern among some parents that speaking other languages might lead to a regression in children's English skills, teachers believed this practice led to a stronger community among students and saw students express desire to learn more words and phrases in new languages. Teachers reported that their biggest indicator of success was seeing students spontaneously using different languages while playing with one another.

As a part of Head Start requirements, teachers conducted a home visit with each student in their class at least once over the course of the year. Two to three teachers attended each home visit and were given questionnaires to fill out with the families. Teachers did not receive a formal training prior to conducting the home visits. Teachers from the previously tuition-based classrooms viewed this requirement as a positive addition. Teachers felt that the practice was a good way to meet parents in the beginning of the year and to observe each child in their home learning environment. Though logistics and planning were challenging, teachers noted that they learned information about each student that would not have been available to them in a classroom context. Teachers suggested that clear guidelines from administration on when and how long these visits occur for would be helpful in facilitating the home visit process.

Families' Experiences

In the parent survey, families were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback on their experiences in the program for the previous year, as well as recommendations for improving the process of integration. Parent feedback was positive in a number of areas: parents consistently praised the quality of teachers, showed an appreciation of diversity in the school, and

described a belief that diversity enhanced the quality of their experience. One parent commented: "I have found the program to be diverse and offer many different learning modalities. I love the extra activities and programs available. It offers creativity and plenty of exposure for my son." Teachers referenced multiple examples of students forming close bonds that transcended socioeconomic status. One teacher commented:

> We had kids from different economic backgrounds really click. One student is on one end of the income spectrum, and one on the other, and they're like soulmates. Having that place to just be and not separated by what you can afford is super important.

Parents reported feeling their children had been positively challenged during their time in the program and that their children's confidence in their own abilities had grown as a result: "She has grown tremendously socially and has been challenged mentally. She is confident of her place in this world and in her community." When asked to discuss their children's experience in the program over the course of the year, parents generally reported that their children loved their experience and felt that they had learned many new, important skills. Parents' sense of their children's positive development was reflected in TSG assessment results. At the end of the school year, 100% of PreK students were meeting or exceeding TSG developmental benchmarks in literacy and social–emotional skills, while 95–98% were meeting or exceeding benchmarks in the cognitive, language, math, and physical domains.

Challenges and Solutions

Communication

Teachers identified communication as one of the main challenges to integration. Teachers voiced a desire to have clear directives about the program's approach to learning, pedagogy, and assessment. While acknowledging that program leadership encouraging an "everyone is learning as we go" mindset was effective, substantive questions regarding pedagogy remained unanswered until after the school year began. This challenge was particularly significant for former tuition-based teachers in light of the volume of Head Start-approved resources, which teachers found helpful but also extremely time consuming to thoroughly review. Frequent team meetings with administration early in the year were the most helpful resource in addressing these challenges, as were the professional development sessions prior to the school year. The teachers discussed how identifying support systems in their area of need improved communication between the classroom and the administration. The length of time to identify sources of support varied across different teachers with some

identifying support within a few weeks of school beginning and others taking several months to do so.

An additional communication-related challenge came in the classrooms, where teachers with different backgrounds and educational philosophies were teamed together for the first time. Pedagogical differences between teachers affected collaboration between co-teachers from different programs in the beginning of the school year. Teachers were not the only ones who felt the impact of these differences. In the parent survey, when asked about their family's experience, one parent responded that "The teaching team felt disjointed." The program sought to pair teachers from different backgrounds in the same classrooms, and while this goal aligned with efforts to entirely integrate the program, teachers had little preparation for negotiating differences in philosophy and practice. Issues of pedagogy were largely addressed by the end of the year through team meetings and discussions with program leadership.

Assessment

Child assessment emerged as a consistent challenge in the focus group, with teachers describing the process as arduous, time consuming, and rarely reflective of student developmental trajectories. Teachers commented that the amount of time needed to complete assessments at three time points during the year (in alignment with Head Start compliance standards) took time away from facilitating learning for students. This feeling seemed to be strongest for teachers previously in the tuition-based preschool, whose teaching philosophy most closely aligned with a more holistic, Reggio Emilia-inspired approach.

Analysis of child assessment data revealed large differences in the Fall to Spring growth scores of Head Start students from the 2018–19 school year, compared to the previous year. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted comparing TSG scores of Head Start students in the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years in each TSG domain. In all domains except literacy and math, Fall TSG scores in the 2018–19 cohort were found to be significantly higher than in the 2017–18 cohort. Similarly, Spring TSG scores were significantly higher for all domains for the 2018–19 cohort. Comparing growth in scores from Fall to Spring repeated this pattern with significantly larger changes in growth for the 2018–19 cohort in all domains except literacy. See Table 1 for individual test results.

Table 1. TSG Scores, 2018–19 Head Start Students Compared to 2017–18 Head Start Students

Construct	Measure-ment	2017–2018 (n = 69)		2018–2019 (n = 54)		
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*
Socio-emotional	Fall	368.80	39.81	398.48	51.65	3.60**
	Spring	416.36	72.47	505.15	61.93	7.18**
	Growth	47.56	64.32	106.67	63.08	5.10**
Cognitive	Fall	419.22	43.30	461.93	51.67	4.99**
	Spring	460.86	74.03	598.74	76.93	10.08**
	Growth	41.64	78.31	136.81	73.33	6.87**
Language	Fall	358.41	49.20	402.69	63.10	4.37**
	Spring	432.61	90.79	515.93	81.71	5.28**
	Growth	74.20	85.41	113.24	84.87	2.53*
Literacy	Fall	570.71	57.81	589.48	54.54	1.83
	Spring	618.17	95.35	675.35	46.63	4.04**
	Growth	47.46	88.05	85.87	54.50	2.81*
Math	Fall	372.23	48.81	385.81	55.30	1.45
	Spring	411.75	74.31	470.07	57.69	4.75**
	Growth	39.52	67.27	84.17	42.50	4.25**
Physical	Fall	505.68	43.69	554.93	66.13	4.96**
	Spring	586.49	101.66	698.81	108.56	5.90**
	Growth	80.81	97.05	143.89	100.46	3.52**

*$p < .01$; **$p < .001$

Community Building

Overall, program staff reported that integration appeared to increase parents' and children's comfort levels in the program, as both groups were able to see the entire building and program as a place for them, rather than feeling like an outsider in particular spaces. Kindergarten admissions events, designed to encourage families of all backgrounds to visit and consider a wide variety of high performing public schools, including dual language Chinese/English programs and progressive schools following a project-driven approach, were highly attended and well received. In the second month of the school year, parents were invited to volunteer as "UPK Classroom Parent Representatives." Parent representatives met monthly with program leadership to share feedback and consult on programming decisions, with a focus on building community

among families. Projects pursued by program leadership and parent representatives included a monthly parenting series, focusing on crowd-sourced topics such as screen time and limit-setting; breakfasts and weekend playdates open to all families; monthly community singalongs; open sessions for families in the art center; and kindergarten admissions sessions including parent panels, visits from DOE partners, workshops for families of children with special needs, and group tours of high-performing local schools.

However, despite these initiatives, community building among the parent body was not as successful as anticipated. In the teacher focus group, teachers were asked how parents had been impacted by integration. Friendships between students from different backgrounds were formed within in the classroom; however, teachers did not see similar relationships form between parents. Teachers advocated for more program structure to introduce and encourage dialogue between parents: "We have children in our class who are best friends, but their parents never talk, and that should really change." This sentiment was repeated by at least one parent who suggested creating more planned opportunities to bring families of different backgrounds together outside of the classroom.

Table 2. Challenges Faced During the Integration Process

Challenge	Description	Solution	Future Steps
Communication	Implementing new teaching practices and standards	Identifying support systems	Social network analysis of teachers to identify networks of support within the program
	Pedagogical differences between teachers in the classroom	Team meetings and discussions with program leadership	Increased preparation & emphasizing communication between teachers
Assessment	Teachers reported TSG as time-consuming	Increased support for teachers for whom TSG was new	Moving to a more holistic assessment approach, which is less time consuming and more indicative of children's progress
	Score inconsistencies across school years	Caution was taken using results as indicative of child development or program success	
Community Building	Despite success integrating students, parent interaction between groups was less common	Increased parent engagement	Expanding integration into younger grades to integrate entire program community

Discussion

The current study described one urban program's experience socioeconomically integrating its preschool classrooms. This initiative was undertaken with the intention to create classrooms that reflected the diversity of the community, to provide families with equitable access to resources, and encourage positive development for all students. The program saw success in integration within the classroom, particularly in exposing its students to a diverse group of peers. The program also ensured parents had equal access to resources including home literacy promoting programs, social workers, and mental health supports. Importantly, the program was able to identify key areas for improvement and growth, particularly regarding communication, assessment, and community building.

High Quality Education and Exposure to Diversity

The most encouraging result for program leadership was the sense from teachers and parents that classrooms were high quality and highly resourced. Program leadership expressed that it was imperative to integrate programs with complementary theories and practices. Children and staff from the holistic Reggio Emilia-inspired program were combined with the family- and compliance-focused Head Start program. Each of these programs had strengths that supported the other. Reggio Emilia fostered a student-based environment that allowed students the freedom to learn through exploration (McClow & Gillespie, 1998; McNally & Slutsky, 2017; Schneider et al., 2014). Meanwhile, Head Start requirements brought the addition of services for the whole family and encouraged teachers to consider children in the context of both their home and school environments.

Almost all students in the program were meeting or exceeding developmental expectations (95–100% across all constructs). This result should be interpreted cautiously given teacher-reported concerns over using this new system for the first time. While it was hypothesized that students' development and abilities would be positively impacted by integration, the significantly higher differences seen in Fall scores from the 2018–19 school year compared to the 2017–18 school year, as well as the large magnitude of growth from Fall to Spring for the 2018–19 school year, raise concerns about the validity of the scores. These large differences are likely more attributable to teachers' lack of familiarity with the assessment system, rather than a direct impact of the intervention. Though teachers received professional development training on using the assessment system, its complexity and requirements for teachers to attend intensive training to achieve various levels of proficiency proved to be a significant challenge.

Despite concerns about validity, assessment results are promising in suggesting that integration did not hamper students from successfully reaching developmental milestones. Less clear from this case study and the literature is specifically how ethnically and socioeconomically diverse classrooms benefit students. Prior research suggests that interactions between students from diverse backgrounds may be the mechanism by which integration provides benefits to all students (Reid, 2014; Reid & Kagan, 2015). However, this mechanism has not been directly tested. Future research that identifies the means by which diverse classrooms lead to positive outcomes would assist teachers and administrators in implementing classroom practices that will lead to improved developmental outcomes for all students. While the Head Start assessment requirements created some challenges, when paired with adequate support for teachers in completing assessments, the requirement allowed the program to track all children's progress towards developmental milestones. This was a valuable addition to the more holistic Reggio Emilia approach to help ensure that all students are on track for successful development. Program leaders needed to provide high levels of support to teachers to assist them in juggling assessment requirements in concert with their many other responsibilities.

Program Support for Teachers

Teachers were on the front line of integration in the program, both in fostering relationships between students and interacting with families. During the summer leading up to the 2018–19 school year, teachers attended multiple professional development sessions focused on preparing them to teach in a socioeconomically integrated program. However, even with this preparation, teachers faced challenges related to integration, particularly in communicating differences of practice in the classroom. Support by program leadership in the form of classroom visits and discussions at team meetings were key to addressing these challenges. In addition to frequent leadership visits, mental health and social work supports were embedded in the classroom and available to all families, regardless of funding source. Mental health services in the form of counseling, support groups, and play therapy were advertised to families, and teachers could also refer families to the mental health team if they felt it would be beneficial. Social workers consulted with teachers to help develop a trauma-informed lens for planning classroom activities and communicating with children and their families. Through professional development, classroom observations, and informal coaching, social workers encouraged teachers to develop culturally responsive and trauma-informed strategies and to reflect on how current classroom practices may serve as triggers for some children and families. Access to services such as counseling, support groups, and play therapy

reduces environmental stress for children, strengthens family systems, and ameliorates the effects of trauma, crisis, and toxic stress (Cappella et al., 2012).

Program support was also essential to helping teachers foster integration in the classroom. While the integration process did not lead to a strong sense of community for parents, potentially due to difficulty overcoming language barriers, integration within the classroom was successful. Teachers reported that students developed friendships with peers from diverse backgrounds. Teachers were integral to fostering classroom community, bringing together groups of students who may not have interacted otherwise, particularly by embracing the diversity of languages represented within the classroom. This aligns with the literature surrounding culturally responsive teaching practices highlighting the importance of intentional community building in diverse settings (Bennett et al., 2018; Henderson & Lasley, 2014). Based on this literature, providing intentional opportunities for parents to be exposed to families from different backgrounds may be a potential strategy to increasing the sense of community parents feel within the program. In other studies, parents have reported obtaining information about choosing schools for their children mainly from social interactions, most frequently with other parents and school staff (Ayscue et al., 2016; Neild, 2005). Therefore, fostering a strong sense of community within the program is important as it could help parents identify resources for choosing a school. As well as helping parents with decisions related to their children's education, a stronger school family community could help build diverse social networks through which parents could increase family social capital so that families are better supported and have access to more opportunities (Briggs, 1998; Lukasiewicz et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

Unfortunately, the response rate to the parent survey was relatively low (39%), and therefore a clear parent perspective on the program's community building efforts is not available. Future research will aim to reach a larger proportion of parents and to provide more in-depth opportunities for parent feedback, such as conducting focus groups with parents. Program leadership has hypothesized that implementing integration in earlier age groups will be critical to building community and trust among families over time, as the first years of parenting present many opportunities for families to bond over shared experiences and challenges. To this end, the program shifted its timeline for integrating the entire program, and as of the 2020–21 school year, all classrooms in the program were socioeconomically integrated.

As often occurs in applied research working with practitioners, the evaluation presented here was planned as an internal assessment to inform program

development. However, as the research team began to document the process of integration during the school year, they recognized that this was a relatively novel initiative and that the results may help to inform other ECE programs. As a result, the majority of the data presented above was collected at the end of the school year. In addition, TSG scores were revealed to be an imperfect metric by which to measure children's development. Going forward, the research team has begun to design data collections to occur at multiple time points throughout the year, and the program has implemented a new assessment system. As the process of integration continues, future research will shift its focus to short-term outcomes that also help to describe the experiences of participants, including a project using social network analysis to more fully understand the types of community that exist between teachers, parents, and children within the integrated program.

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Appendix. Supplemental Materials

Classroom Strategies—Promoting Language

1. Systematic presentation of vocabulary
   - Presenting vocabulary thematically helps children make associations
   - Categories and themes make retrieval of word easier
   - Multiple exposures to words
   - Read-alouds
   - Dramatic play organized around familiar theme or book theme
2. Small group work
   - Provide frequent opportunities (daily experiences) to share books in small groups
   - Great opportunity to utilize family volunteers, community, aides
3. Child's interests guide curriculum decisions
   - A child's engagement in an activity promotes attention and regulation
4. Feedback and encouragement
   - Comes in the context of social interaction

- Pairing ELL's with strong English-language users
- Provide verbal models that child can use in real-time interaction
- Open-ended q's or q's with multiple answers helps expand phrase length

5. Structure the routine, structure the classroom space
   - Predictable routines allow child to anticipate what will happen, language
   - Carrier phrases invite verbal/non-verbal responses
   - Consistent physical environment can cue a child on activity and behavior
6. Encourage continued development in dominant language
   - Home book reading; schedule rotation of books or weekly book loan
   - Incorporate home language in classroom when possible; this also gives ELL a change to "lead" their friends
7. Keep language "rich"
   - Rich, expansive language promotes oral language better than simplified language
   - Classroom provides a natural context to support meaning
   - Supplement with gesture or pictures

Classroom Strategies: Promoting Literacy

1. Many literacy skills *transfer*
   - For a child who has developed first language literacy skills, easer to develop same skills in English
   - Encourage family to use home language to teach rhyme/song, play word games, share books
   - Book-loaning system of books in child's dominant language
2. Book Acting
   - Use props
   - Repetitive dialogue
   - Acting out in groups gives a natural support
   - Volunteer to read story in home language; support child's retelling in home language
3. Develop Alphabet Knowledge
   - Toolbox alphabet sorting
   - Other letter recognition games
4. Phonological Awareness Games
   - Recognize rhyming words
   - Recognize syllables within words
   - Recognize beginning sounds in words
5. Encourage a Love of Print
   - Interactive book read
   - "pretend" reading and writing
   - Act-outs of song, nursery rhyme, poems
   - Dedicated independent book reading (later on, retell)