

An Analysis of U.S. Newspaper Coverage Of Early Childhood Education

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INTRODUCTION

Interest in early childhood education has existed for centuries, stimulating discussion, research and debate over the effects of early schooling. But only within the last few decades has a groundswell of demand brought about dramatic changes. Waves of change keep on coming for pre-kindergarten, most in three forms: (1) enrollments that evolve to meet demands from varying social, economic and age groups formerly unconcerned with education outside the home; (2) programs that offer greater variety and availability, often provided by state or federal funds; and, perhaps most important, (3) research that yields new and conclusive justifications for sending children to school prior to age 5.

The new developments in early childhood education have gone largely uncovered by major newspapers, unlike recent waves of change in other fields – say, for example, business and technology. Even some of the nation’s largest newspapers pay little attention to this issue. A Lexis-Nexis search of *The New York Times* for the year 2000, a year of significant research findings about early education, yielded 51 stories focused on early education. This number compared to 286 stories in the same year on mortgage innovations and more than 1,500 about new technologies.

Why are such differences in coverage of concern? Newspapers have a traditional role of educating adult Americans and setting agendas for public action. If pre-kindergarten research is left uncovered by the media, then the public may not learn of findings that quality preschool grads have higher high school graduation rates and lower crime rates later in life. In essence, imbalances in coverage of early childhood education can result in an ill-informed, under-concerned, and even underserved public. Misplaced

emphasis in coverage also may lead to incorrect assumptions (Gerbner, 1969). Coverage in 2003, for example, would suggest that satellite dishes for automobiles, given extensive attention throughout the year, are a higher priority issue than developments in early education. Technology is the sexier topic, but many new technologies affect only a small, elite audience. Meanwhile, thousands of families (not to mention millions of taxpayers) potentially are affected by research that connects good nutrition, dental and pediatric care and other health care services to a child's future successes.

EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

A University of Maryland at College Park study conducted for The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media looked at a national sample of 1,176 newspaper news stories from the years 2000 and 2003 to examine coverage of early childhood education topics. The statistical study of 25 sampled newspapers sought, through content analysis, to profile typical coverage of early childhood education by focusing on these research questions:

1) What are the characteristics and themes of typical newspaper coverage of pre-kindergarten and early childhood education?

2) What are the characteristics and themes of coverage of early education in locales experiencing dramatic initiatives or changes concerning pre-kindergarten and early childhood education?

3) How do newsroom staffs, processes and standards shape coverage of pre-kindergarten and early childhood education?

The researchers began with only question one but, in planning this broad analysis, realized that the news value of early education topics is not equal in all locations or in all

news organizations. To account for these differing news environments, the two additional research questions were developed for the present study. To address these secondary questions, researchers used textual analysis of news stories and also interviewed reporters, editors and others whose coverage has included early education topics in the past five years.

The rationale, methods, results and findings of the report are detailed in the following sections. Researchers conclude with possible explanations for their findings, recommendations for improving media coverage, and implications for the overall practice of journalism. Further research is recommended.

BACKGROUND: A TIME OF PARADIGM CHANGE

This study coincided with a time of social change regarding pre-kindergarten. Demand for early childhood education is strong and growing in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education found in the fall of 1998 that 80 percent of all children starting kindergarten already had some experience with child care away from home.

That figure reflects changes in the economy, society and education. Many families today are pressured by economic conditions to work more hours away from home. And increasingly, the U.S. economy is shifting from an industrial model to one based on knowledge, which places a premium on education. As more parents work outside the home, society recognizes the value of providing child care that is more than warehousing, and that has an educational component. In terms of education, the drive to increase student performance is leading some experts to look at early childhood education as a way to offset the adverse effects of poverty and help students achieve academic success later in life.

For those reasons, many politicians across the country have found that early childhood education resonates with voters, and reflects a change in paradigms. The old paradigm saw education as beginning with kindergarten, both as a matter of education policy and as a reflection of the social value of having young children at home with one or more parent, especially the mother. The new paradigm sees the pre-kindergarten years, especially those 3 and 4 years old, as too critical to leave to chance. That is why some societies, such as the Soviet Union (Where two of our researchers call home), see pre-kindergarten as when school begins.

To be sure, there is room for debate in American society regarding the importance that should be placed on pre-kindergarten. There are education debates regarding the value of nurturing and education. Should 3-year-olds be focused on flash cards or learning how to share? And there are legitimate funding debates. Advocates of early childhood education often cite huge paybacks of up to \$7 for every dollar spent, a figure that comes mostly from calculating the percentage of students who might otherwise spend time in jail, and adding in the cost of the judicial system. But other education research shows that early childhood education may not bring as many rewards as investments in improving the quality of the classroom teacher, to cite an example.

These debates should be played out in the pages of U.S. newspapers. Conflict is a common journalistic frame, and such stories about the valid debates regarding early childhood education merit coverage. But oddly enough, we found very little coverage that helped readers and taxpayers better understand preschool, even as demand grows.

What are the origins of recent increases in demand for preschool, as opposed to merely child care? In large part, demand comes from mothers. The Bureau of Labor

Statistics says today almost 65% of mothers with preschool children are in the labor force. These women are flooding the labor market for a variety of reasons. Some are driven to work by an uncertain economy, and others are forced to work by welfare reforms or other government mandates. Still another group, a healthy percentage of women with young children, work to pursue or maintain coveted careers. Yet another group, African Americans in particular, demands early childhood education as an educational equity issue, one that can lead to academic credentials and access to good jobs for the next generation.

Some of today's media interest in early schooling may result from recent specialized research. Numerous studies show that early childhood education greatly enhances the chance at a positive future for children. Young children who are taught the basics -- such as alphabets, colors, one-digit numbers and simple words -- start school ready to move on to the next academic level. They also exhibit an understanding of acceptable behavior towards peers and other needed socialization skills. These young scholars appear to progress more smoothly through later grades and stages of life as well, which studies show also are enhanced by early education. Research indicates that graduates of quality preschool programs have lower incidents of grade repetition, and higher school retention and graduation rates. Also, former preschoolers are less likely to be involved in crimes than those who did not receive early education. Budget-conscious government officials increasingly are aware of these studies about early childhood education and eagerly partner with businesses to cash in on the benefits.

Now, more than at any previous time, government has issued its own demands as it seeks to boost student achievement on standardized tests. The requirements that had

been promulgated not only are dramatic, but, to a large extent, systemic. President Bush's 2001 "No Child Left Behind" initiative encourages school officials — indeed all officials -- to broaden their perspective on early education. Today's struggle for new and better educational solutions is essential and calls attention to preschool as a possible catalyst to jump start the nation's troubled schools and provide equal opportunity to an ever more diverse population.

Early childhood education, therefore, has new status in political circles and at power lunches, where it now is discussed as a possible answer to daunting social, economic and academic problems in public life. Some disadvantaged groups view it as a vehicle to close the gap between their poor quality-of-life in the present and the nation's promise of a prosperous future. Suddenly, early childhood education is essential to plans in statehouses and planks in campaign platforms.

For politicians, the early childhood paradigm is shifting away from the traditional kindergarten-through-12th -grade structure. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., said: "We need to invest in early education if we are serious about improving student achievement, minimizing learning disabilities and emotional disorders, and ensuring that children arrive ready to learn on the first day of school, graduate from high school, attend college, and excel in the workforce." Kennedy estimates that nearly 20 million U.S. children under 5 years old don't receive "the nurturing they need to learn and grow." His comments reflect the thought that early education should encompass intellectual enrichment and cognitive development, as well as a young child's need for social and emotional growth.

Kennedy and others have long touted the benefits of Head Start, created in 1964 by the federal government to help poor children. Head Start was designed to serve mainly only one class of children, those from economically disadvantaged families. Today's new paradigm embraces children of all classes, races and ethnicities. It challenges the notion that the care of toddlers should be the sole responsibility of their parents. New research on brain development and the intellectual accomplishments that begin at birth and accelerate through childhood underscores the need for early quality education for all children. (Shonkoff 2000).

While public officials are learning about the power of pre-kindergarten, journalists may be less attentive to this new trend. News professionals, conventionally trained and socialized, appear to doubt that topics such as "numeracy" and "language development" belong on the front pages of the nation's newspapers. News coverage is spotty and inconsistent, with the issue landing on front pages and leading news hours only if embroiled in controversy, the topic of political candidates or if the life and well being of children are endangered. As reports pour from the National Academy of Sciences and national journals, and as Congress expands budgets for early childhood issues, news media must begin to pay more and better attention if they are going to be relevant to their audiences.

How are U.S. newspapers handling this broadening in educational priorities? How are newsrooms coping with coverage of the recent emphasis on earlier education as opposed to the familiar world of K-12? The present study addresses these questions and others that arise when traditional news values encounter a new news environment.

As preparation for our research, a review of history and literature related to the coverage of early childhood education is essential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of caring for young children outside the home away from the mother began in 18th century Europe but arrived in America during the Industrial Revolution. Some factory owners, charities and churches operated or financed “infant schools” so that workers could spend their days in the factory without worrying about their children. Initially, infant schools were merely caretaking institutions, but slowly they embraced programs that taught educational basics (Lascarides 2000, 69-81). Massachusetts officials grappled with the issue of infant schools as early as 1830, when a Boston Primary School Committee rejected a petition to formally incorporate these programs into the city’s public schools. Despite this action, many 3- and 4-year-olds in Massachusetts attended public schools with their older siblings until the mid-19th century (Beatty 2004).

New York City had 58 infant schools in 1853. The New York Public School Society, confirming the notion that the schools were a way to counteract some of the damaging effects of poverty, said the infant mind is capable of receiving instruction at the age of 2 or 3 years; thus, poor children could be given a head start before they entered primary school (Lascarides 2000, 79-80).

“Day nursery” was another name for the institutions. Reformers wanted to change education to be practical, moral and democratic while used as a vehicle for citizenship indoctrination. Though day nurseries initially foundered because women did not eagerly embrace the concept, they began to take root as cities quickly filled with immigrants looking for work. Kindergartens flourished in the late 1800s. Officials, at that time,

estimated the existence of about 3,000 public and private kindergartens in the United States, serving some 200,000 children.

These programs did get media coverage, although it is difficult to know exactly to what extent. An 1899 article in *The New York Times* about a Day Nurseries Conference provides some assurance of reporters' awareness of the issue. The article illustrated the prevalence of the programs as conference members hailed from New York City, from Newark and Jersey City, and from Chicago. The reporter outlined some key concerns:

One of the matters under discussion was a movement that has been started in the Federation of Day Nurseries for extending the day nursery work. This work is at present, according to the rules, confined to children under seven years old. The leaders in the federation have concluded that it is the duty of the nurseries to look after the children after they pass that age (New York Times 1899).

Americans learned of kindergarten from an article in which Dr. Henry Barnard, a Connecticut legislator, recounted his experience with the programs two years earlier at the International Exhibit of Educational Systems in London. Barnard championed free kindergarten education in articles he published from 1855 to 1882 in the then highly influential *American Journal of Education*. In November 1859, the Unitarian Church newspaper, the *Christian Examiner*, published an article about kindergarten in Germany and included a summary of Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel's ideas about early education (Lascarides 2000, 235).

The growth of nursery schools is closely associated with the history of women's political activism. The idea of using young children for arduous factory work began to lose favor and eventually succumbed to political and social criticism. In the early 1900s, reformers and industry founders wanted to provide safe care for children of working mothers. The schools' original purposes were to meet the physical, nutritional and health

needs of neglected children, with hygiene and morality being the main focus. The predominate theme was to overcome family deficiencies because most students came from poor families. At the 1899 Day Nurseries Conference, J. Eugene Whitney, secretary of the People's University Extension Society, stressed the importance of teaching "mothers of the working classes the value of doing their own marketing, to practice rigid economy in the saving of labor, and to cook food so as to make it digestible" (*New York Times* 1899).

When the U.S. Children's Bureau was established in 1912, it marked formal recognition that the national government had a responsibility to promote the welfare of all its children. This notion was underscored in 1913 when Dr. Maria Montessori, Italy's first female physician, visited the United States for a lecture tour on her unique educational methods, then called "auto-education." Journalists from newspapers, journals and magazines doggedly recorded her every word, action and deed from the moment she set foot on American soil on Dec. 3, 1913 (Kornegay 1981). The more the media sought to interpret Montessori's comments, the more intense were debates about child care and early childhood education. One journal, *Current Opinion*, reported the visit "unloosed a thousand tongues and a thousand pens" (Kornegay 1981). Among the newspapers covering the event, besides *The New York Times*, were *The Boston Herald* and *The Boston Daily Globe*, *The Providence Journal*, *Detroit Tribune*, *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and *The New York Tribune*.

Articles, editorials, commentaries and letters to the editor showed that controversy over many of her practices forced educators, politicians and policymakers to focus on whether "the Method was adaptable to prevailing systems" (Kornegay 1981). Early

childhood education claimed the attention of President Woodrow Wilson and his first wife, Ellen Louise Axson, along with Alexander Graham Bell and his wife Mabel Hubbard Bell, Helen Keller and a host of other prominent Americans. They all embraced Montessori's visit and vigorously discussed their concerns. For years, the Bells had experimented with methods of teaching, particularly the deaf. Mabel Bell reportedly was "unsympathetic to prevailing kindergarten methods" (Kornegay 1981).

A *Washington Post* article dated Dec. 4, 1913, quoted Montessori: "Let the schools take the place of the hospitals and penitentiaries." Her meaning, the newspaper explained, was that "While disease and crime may not be entirely eradicated, Dr. Montessori ... is convinced that both may be minimized to a point of practical elimination if the proper attention is given children in their early school years" (*Post* 1913). Many of Montessori's cogent arguments are echoed today.

In 1915-16, parent cooperative preschools began in the United States as educational experiences for young children and their parents. The first was the Northside Cooperative Nursery School in Pasadena, Calif. Experts touted this and similar programs because they typically were organized by professionals, not by parents who struggled to be involved in their children's education while meeting their own needs for child care. This program's use of parents, volunteers and paraprofessionals in the daily operations was later incorporated into Head Start.

One of the earliest nursery schools in the country was the Nursery Training School of Boston (1922-1952), which was financed by the Women's Education Association of Boston (Lascarides 2000, 295-365). Like the Head Start program today,

the nursery school cooperated with health clinics, social service agencies and parents. In 1952, the school became affiliated with Tufts University in Medford, Mass.

A new emphasis in biology, physiology, psychology and medicine gave rise to researchers' interest in the field of early childhood. In 1921, the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station opened half-day programs for children ages 2 to 6 years. The children served as research subjects for university graduate students and faculty members. In 1924, the nursery school at the Iowa State College was established to serve as an observation lab for home economics majors. Again, the focus was on hygiene and morality. Then, in 1926, Yale researcher Arnold Gesell paid for facilities for the observation and guidance of young children and to develop, for parents, flexible, individualized procedures to work with their children. During this period, the program's focus shifted from meeting physical, nutritional and health needs to concentrating on the emotional, social and intellectual development of the young child.

The primary obstacle to all early programs was society's belief that young children should never be separated from their mothers. Even Social Security, for instance, and other public U.S. policies were more oriented to providing income support for mothers to stay home than child care support that would put children in nursery school and encourage mothers to work outside the home. But in the 1930s and '40s, the federal government became a major actor in the child care field. As record unemployment gripped the country, President Roosevelt initiated the Works Progress Administration in 1933. For the first time, public funds were available for out-of-home care and were used to provide childcare jobs for unemployed teachers, janitors, nurses and cooks. In the 1940s, about \$51 million was spent to support 3,000 day care centers serving at their

peak of 105,000 preschool and school-age children. Brookings Institute researcher Steiner Gilbert described these centers as being primarily designed to help win the war rather than provide education services. The centers were seen as a jobs program (Lombardi 2003).

Scientific discoveries also altered daycare centers. In 1952, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget had observed that intelligence is not solely the result of maturation or learning. Instead, he asserted intelligence is the product of the child's interaction with his or her environment and said that the quality of the learning environment in the formative years is vital (Wolf and Kessler 1987, 19). Along with the physical spurt in brain growth, psychologists have suggested substantial intellectual growth is accomplished by age 4. "According to behavioral theory, learning is shaped by the environment in which the child is nurtured. Early childhood curriculum is, therefore, most effective when it is systematically controlled to elicit desired responses" (Freidus 1993, 27).

Child care was considered part of the federal welfare system from 1960 to 1989. It claimed a crucial role in President Johnson's "War on Poverty," but the focus of teachers and other providers was on cognitive development, not necessarily intellectual growth. Edward Zigler, the Yale researcher who advised Johnson, helped create Head Start in 1965 as a way to set American children and families on a course toward a better life (Zigler 1992, 1-27). Sargent Shriver also was involved in the creation of Head Start, with the help of a broad range of scientists and experts in children's services. The program, which was part of the Office of Economic Opportunity's Community Action Program, consists of six major parts: administration, education, social services, health services, parental involvement and career development.

Because Head Start focused on low-income children, it reinforced a dual system of child care. Unlike the earlier days, a more significant aspect of Head Start was its emphasis on young children's intellectual development. Head Start programs deliberately provided children with stimulating early experiences and reinforced the idea that different children needed different programs. Traditionally, poor children had been offered didactic instruction while privately funded, middle-class programs focused on social and emotional development with advice and insights from professionals. Finally, meeting individual needs had become part of preschool for children who needed it most.

With the creation of Head Start in 1965 came vigorous discussions of kindergarten, pre-kindergarten and early childhood education. At that time, there was no public kindergarten in 32 states, and public pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds were nonexistent. Today, however, kindergarten is available in all states.

Head Start began with the press in mind, some say. The program was designed to help poor people improve their own lives and Shriver, who talked of the "hovering press," shrewdly focused the media's attention on children (Zigler 1992, 1-28). News reporters followed the lead of Shriver and other federal officials describing Head Start as "educational and social enrichment for poor children about to enter the first grade" or "giving culturally deprived and poverty-stricken children a better chance" (*New York Times* 1965). Newspapers widely reported Lady Bird Johnson's comments that Head Start was "a lifeline to rescue those of the next generation who are 'lost in a sea of too little of everything'" (UPI 1965).

Even *The New York Times* offered compelling reasons for the existence of Head Start. A May 19, 1965, article stated:

The Head Start projects will give many deprived children their first look into a story book, their first chance to play with alphabet blocks and their first glimpse into the middle-class environment around which educational systems and teaching aids are built.

The nature of Head Start's birth also attracted media coverage. It was launched as an instant nationwide program, rapidly providing half a million poor children with basic medical and dental care and two nutritious meals a day – services many of them had not experienced before. Nationwide implementation not only made the program highly visible but also created the grassroots support that would protect Head Start later on. Yet program costs were not calculated until long after implementation, which pushed Head Start coverage into traditional journalistic frames of politics and money.

On August 26, 1965, *The New York Times* carried a front-page story that began:

Officials of New York's Project Head Start acknowledged yesterday that the eight-week program for 5-year-olds had experienced numerous financial troubles. But they added that it had worked wonders for thousands of underprivileged children.

.....

The program's financial troubles, said a group of Head Start staff officials, may be attributed largely to the speed with which the program was conceived and begun early this summer.

Today, Head Start is the leading health care and early education system for low-income U.S. children. Funding remains a key issue. Sen. Kennedy estimates the program serves only three out of every five eligible children in the nation, leaving an estimated 2.6 million eligible children without the services.

Head Start has weathered a series of ambiguous and often critical reports about effectiveness, as well as unsuccessful efforts to expand the program to widely include

middle-class children. In 1971, President Richard Nixon vetoed legislation that would have provided day care at no cost to welfare families and on a fee-paying basis for working and middle-class families. He expressed unwillingness to commit “the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over and against the family-centered approach,” illustrating the conflicted nature of Americans about “good mothering.” In the early 1980s, President Ronald Reagan reduced government’s role in the early childhood arena, cutting funding so much that class sizes increased and wages fell behind inflation so much that it was difficult to keep qualified staff.

In 1989, President George H.W. Bush set a goal that by the year 2000, all children in America would start school ready to learn (though early childhood education and child care remained separate issues). Still, the elder Bush provided needed leadership when he challenged governors at the National Education Summit to set goals for huge educational gains in the 21st century. Nearly every major media outlet in the nation covered this highly publicized event.

Media coverage of children’s issues increased in the 1990s, though much of it was spurred by social crises and negative events related to substance abuse and by tragedies resulting from school and community violence (Zigler, Stevenson and Hall 2001). Still, some journalists attempted to monitor the progress of promises made at the 1989 summit. President Bush had proposed a \$600 million increase in Head Start for 1993 to ensure that the program “is available to every eligible 4-year-old by the year 2000” so that “all children in America will start school ready to learn.” And, in 1993, former President Gerald Ford sent a different, more succinct message: “I have come to realize, today,

universal access to quality child care is imperative in all our communities – urban, suburban, rural and industrial, middle class and poor. We must all become part of the effort to provide this care. And this effort must start today.” At that time, the former president was the honorary chair of the newly formed Childcare Action Campaign (Lascarides 2000, 368).

Subsequent coverage of this issue was sparse. A report by the Berkeley Media Studies Group found that coverage of child care in 18 of the largest U.S. newspapers from 1994 to 1998 had the tone or frame that child care is a “necessary evil, a serious policy issue.” Few articles viewed it as a “social good” (Berkeley 1999).

Some of the current interest in child care may have been sparked by numerous studies showing brain development begins within the first month after conception. A 2004 issue of *Time* magazine quoted researchers saying that by the time a child is 6 years old, the brain has reached 90 percent to 95 percent of its adult size (Time 2004, 1). “The most rapid brain growth occurs in the first three years of a child’s life. By age 3, a child’s brain has formed about 1,000 trillion connections – about twice as many as adults have. By early adolescence, the brain is eliminating more synapses than it produces. By late adolescence, half of the synapses have been discarded, leaving only 500 trillion. This number remains relatively constant through the rest of the life cycle” (Shore 1997). Such research findings make clear a challenge for public policymakers to reflect scientific knowledge about the significance of early brain development in the organization of pre-kindergarten programs.

Other studies underscore the importance of early childhood education. Studies on social development of children indicate that children who go through an early childhood

program are less likely to get involved in criminal activities or to drop out of school at an early age (Gomby, Larner, Stevenson, Lewit and Behrman 1995). In addition, those who attend preschool programs show increased commitment to school, have better relationships with friends and neighbors, achieve greater economic success as adults and, in case of girls, are more likely to get married and have fewer out-of-wedlock births (Yoshikawa 1995).

Studies, reports, position papers and policy proposals on early children education abound from private foundations and advocacy groups. In July 2000, child care experts working on a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education recommended that the nation's fragmented preschool programs should be coordinated and linked with the public school system. This approach would enable public schools to involve families and preschool care and education programs concerning school readiness, expectations and early school success (Hinkle 2000). Similar conclusions were reached in August 2003 by researchers at the Center for Law and Social Policy based in Washington, DC. However, they stress that budget restraints in most states account for problems in coordinating rigorous standards in child care. (Schumacher 2003).

Media interest in early childhood education also depends on the strength and power of the message communicated by advocates of early education. The Annenberg Public Policy Center sponsored a February 2003 study that stressed the need for more communication and coordination among organizations regarding messages concerning early childhood development and education; the same report encouraged the use of sound evidence to bolster arguments (Annenberg 2003). Communication about early education also was emphasized in a report from the nation's governors in January 2005. The goal of

the governors in this report was to assist state policymakers in implementing intervention policies and strategies that support early childhood programs in their states (NGA 2005).

While all this information has come to light in recent years, media coverage of early childhood education is still sparse. As of March 2005, 42 states and the District of Columbia have some manner of publicly funded preschool programs. At the vanguard are Georgia, Oklahoma, New York, New Jersey and Florida. But even in those states where pre-k is a going concern, news coverage of its complexities is scarce. Counts of stories in Atlanta, New York and Tulsa, for example, in the present study show media interest in early education was piqued only when the topic became interconnected with state budgets and politics. The following lead from *The New York Times* is typical of preschool coverage: “Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver’s weapon of choice this year is preschool education, and he is using it to attack his political rival, Gov. George E. Pataki, at every turn” (Hu, 2003). The remainder of this story—and of most stories mentioning early education—conform to traditional news topics: conflict, prominence, power, and money.

SUMMARY

For nearly 200 years, the United States has been grappling with the role of educating young children. Studies show that children who receive some education before kindergarten are better able to learn and are more likely to advance society. Moreover, the debate that Maria Montessori spawned continues today: do young children need nurturing or education?

Today, we see a shift in the model that we as Americans value for early education. The old model – nurturing young children at home in their first years – is fading in light of (1) economic realities that force parents to work and (2) the growing

realization that early education has personal and societal benefits. The new model that values educating children as early as age 3 reflects research showing the benefits of pre-kindergarten for all children. The national movement to raise education standards, both at the state level and through the No Child Left Behind law, may also play a part in changing national attitudes, requiring society to consider the role early childhood education can play in our nation's future.

The question for the present study is whether the updated model for early education is being reflected in the nation's newspapers. Are newspapers helping to inform readers about research regarding pre-kindergarten? Are journalists giving taxpayers information they need to help sort through conflicting ideas about early childhood education and where to spend their money? Or is coverage caught in a "Twilight Zone" of politics and money?

The next chapter outlines a national study addressing those questions, offers a summary of findings and suggests conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

A mix of University of Maryland faculty, and graduate and doctoral students at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism comprised the research team. The researchers included academics, experienced journalists and students. Some are parents, such as a former newspaper publisher with four children, and two have children currently enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs. Seven team members, all students in a doctoral-level journalism research class, met weekly in a research seminar as they conducted a thorough literature review, collected a large sample of news stories, and coded, entered and analyzed data. Their work followed the methodological plan described in the following sections.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The primary focus of the study was on newspaper coverage, so researchers first undertook a content analysis of news texts about pre-kindergarten, and early childhood education (referred to from this point on as Pre-K/ECE). This content analysis was designed to address the first, and major, research question for the study:

1. What are the characteristics and themes of typical coverage of pre-kindergarten/early childhood issues?

Using Lexis-Nexis and Factiva databases, researchers examined pre-kindergarten, early childhood education and Head Start articles from 23 major daily U.S. newspapers. They were: *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *The (Baltimore) Sun*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Buffalo News*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, *The Denver Post*, *The Hartford Courant*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Miami Herald*, *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *The Omaha World-Herald*, *The Pittsburgh Post-*

Gazette, The San Diego Union-Tribune, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Seattle Times, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The St. Petersburg Times, The (Newark) Star-Ledger, The Star Tribune (Minneapolis), The Tampa Tribune, and The Times-Picayune (New Orleans) and Tulsa World. The cities were selected because of availability of their archives and also because they represent a variety of geographic locations, ownership patterns and circulation sizes. The sample stories were drawn in two stages, covering the years 2000 and 2003. These two years were chosen because they captured current stories but avoided atypical content about the tragedies of September 2001. In addition, these two years contribute to a balanced view of education news, with one being a healthy financial year (2000 was also a national election year) and the other, 2003, being a year in which state governments faced serious budget problems.

Each of the seven graduate students was assigned two to three newspapers. Using the primary terms “pre-kindergarten,” “Pre-K” and “early childhood education,” their searches yielded up to 200 stories per year per newspaper. Many of these stories included obituaries and accounts of weddings, as well as other materials irrelevant to the study. Once these unrelated stories were removed, each student drew from the remaining stories a sample of fewer than 100 stories per paper by selecting a random number, N . Each student had a unique number and selected every n th story. During the sampling process, they also conducted an extensive review of literature. Research included literature on coverage of education generally and coverage of Pre-K/ECE specifically. This literature review allowed for development of coding categories so that all news stories could be analyzed in a uniform way.

Once the literature review and sampling procedures were completed, research associates assisted in developing the code sheet/coding instructions included here as Appendix A. Each graduate student completed the coding and data entry for his or her portion of the larger database. Also, each student conducted a small content analysis considering only the two to three newspapers he or she coded. In their independent analyses, the students examined different study categories. One student, for example, looked at how stories in her small sample approached the topic of reading readiness; another looked at differences between her two papers in terms of their service to readers; yet another looked at the tendency of major papers to relegate education coverage to zoned or suburban editions. The researchers shared individual reports in the seminar, which assisted in planning for final analysis of the full database. The principal investigator worked on the full database. Results of the separate, smaller studies and of the overall data analysis all are included in the “Findings” section of this paper.

CASE STUDIES

The case study method was used to address the second research question:

- 2. What are characteristics and themes of coverage of these issues in cities where dramatic initiatives or changes have taken place concerning pre-kindergarten/early childhood education?**

Answering this question required a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods through case studies of news in cities where changes have taken place in pre-kindergarten/early childhood options during the past several years. News coverage from these five cities was studied: Atlanta, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Newark and Tulsa. These

case studies were conducted in the fall of 2004, concurrent with the content analysis, so that conclusions would be independent rather than reinforcing.

Using the same search-and-sample method proposed for Stage 1, a sample of news stories was drawn for the five case-study cities and assigned for critical reading to one of five researchers, all of whom were teaching faculty or administrators in the College of Journalism. In analyzing these case-study stories, researchers repeated methods used by Dr. Susan Moeller in her published 2004 study of media coverage of weapons of mass destruction (Moeller 2004). Each researcher took random groups of the sample stories and read intently. As reading progressed, the researchers marked key words and concepts in the texts. At periodic meetings, the researchers came to some agreement about major trends and themes in coverage, and also about interesting anomalies. Some stories were worth isolating and analyzing separately. Only after weeks of reading and discussion did any researcher attempt to write a detailed summary of his or her analysis of coverage in the case-study newspapers. A summary of findings of case study research also is included in the “Findings” section of this report, along with results of the content analysis. In addition to the individual summaries, a discussion of commonalities and differences among the five cases also is included. In addition, case study results are compared to the findings of content analysis.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews with reporters and others were the final method used to complete the study of coverage of pre-kindergarten and early childhood education. These interviews addressed the third and final research question:

3. How do newsroom staff, processes and standards shape coverage of pre-kindergarten and early childhood education?

Seeking to better understand the motivation and origin for stories about pre-kindergarten and early childhood education, researchers chose a sub-sample from the Stage 1 and Stage 2 stories, selecting every *n*th story until a representative group of 160 stories remained. Reporters' names were taken from these stories and traced to an address and office phone number. A letter, attached here as Appendix B, was mailed to the sampled reporters, telling them that we would be calling to ask them a few questions about their work for research purposes. A photocopy of one of their stories was also included to help with remembering details and contexts of coverage so that researchers could reach the goal of knowing what we referred to as the “story behind the story.”

A questionnaire, attached here at Appendix C, was developed by the research team and used as the basis for interviews with 25 reporters. Many had moved on to new jobs or locations, and could not be interviewed. Many others did not return our calls or said they remembered too little to help us. But the interviews we completed shed much light on the research question and provide impetus for further research. These interview responses are discussed in the “Findings” section of this report.

POOLING THREE METHODOLOGIES

The hope of the researchers was always that this three-part approach would have a yield much greater than simply the sum of its parts, and we believe this has been the case. We as researchers found when that all study results are viewed — even with all the hundreds of clippings, numbers, percentages, charts and anomalies—a clear and

compelling set of findings is present, deeply rooted in all three methods used in this study. These findings will be discussed in detail in the following section.

RESULTS

Discussion in the first three sections of this report indicates that there are opportunities for journalists in all things related to pre-kindergarten and early childhood education – news that affects families, taxpayers, businesses and the broader society; news that offers guidance for ambitious politicians and policymakers; news that addresses quality-of-life issues such as increased success in school and in life for children who receive high-quality early education. There is hope in early childhood education, predicted by academic research and borne out by the real-life experiences in states that have funded universal early childhood education.

In contrast, this study in all three stages — the content analysis, the case studies and the reporter interviews — suggests that traditional news coverage often overlooks pre-k /ece as a newsworthy subject. The following summary of results shows a pervasive pattern of coverage that is shallow, routine and only occasionally concerned with teaching and learning processes. It is particularly noteworthy that this pattern persists even among articles specifically labeled as education stories and even in communities with substantial public spending on early education.

The following characteristics emerged through all stages of the study and in all newspapers that were part of the study:

- Deep concern with political processes and budgets.
- Peripheral concern with impacts of teaching and learning.
- Little concern with research-based knowledge on pre-k /ece.
- Lack of enterprise in mining inherent news value in pre-k /ece coverage.

- Missed opportunities to serve audiences

The data presented in the following sections will show evidence of these trends that was found throughout the three stages of the study.

A. The Content Analysis

Tables 1-17, included here as Appendix D, summarize major findings of the Content Analysis, in which researchers sampled and coded 1,176 stories about pre-kindergarten and/or early childhood education. In our selections, the concept of education was central, so many stories solely about day care were eliminated prior to analysis, as were accounts of weddings or funerals of people linked to pre-k /ece teaching.

Our initial search of 23 newspapers in Lexis-Nexis produced more than 4,000 news stories. After eliminating stories about day care, weddings and funerals, we randomly selected the sample shown in Table 1. It displays the number of stories sampled for each newspaper.

Table 2 indicates the expected difference in emphasis found in the sampled stories, showing that, where newspapers served states enrolling more than 25,000 children in pre-k, stories were more likely to be concerned with pre-k /ece issues. Over half of the stories in the high-enrollment areas had a major focus on early education, compared to less than half—about 44 percent—of the stories from low-enrollment areas. The difference between the two groups was statistically significant.

Table 3 indicates what types of stories appeared in the sample. Just over half were traditional news articles, with the next most populous category being

briefs and announcements — not a surprising finding given the activities that are involved in early education. What is surprising is the number of editorials, opinion pieces and letters to the editor found in this tally. Together, editorials and letters account for about 15 percent of the stories. These alone would be excellent material for further study.

1. Topics and Frames

At the heart of the study are Tables 4-7, showing the topics and themes that appeared in the sampled stories. Both topic and theme categories were developed following extensive literature reviews. The list of categories includes content areas that the research team fully expected to find. These tables, with many categories virtually unpopulated, show that our expectations were not met: less than two percent of stories dealt with each of the following topics:

- Child Abuse/crime
- Training/unemployment
- Field trips/extracurricular activities
- Health care
- Racial issues
- Religious issues
- Income/socio-economic status
- Standards/testing
- Technologies
- Education materials
- Disabilities

Considered together, these topics include many of the deeper issues underlying all education stories, yet they represent less than 15 percent of the coverage.

In response to the surprising distribution of topics, researchers developed a new list of topics that combined old categories into a reduced and simplified set of categories shown in Table 5. The new categories show that funding issues were the single greatest concern among the sampled stories, accounting for about 20 percent. Stories about politics were just about as numerous, accounting for another fifth of the sample and followed closely by academics and academic standards. These four categories account for some two-thirds of all the coverage.

Analysis of the frames proceeded in two stages. Table 6 shows the initial tally of coded frames, showing that most stories fit one of two frames: either “pre-k /ece is good for society, or “government should have a role in pre-k.” As with topics, few stories fit into expected frames, such as “pre-k provides broad economic benefit” (1.1 percent), pre-k /ece is expensive (2.6 percent), and “safety and well-being of children in pre-k /ece is problematic” (2.1 percent). Because some categories were so sparsely populated, frames were recoded into three simple groups: positive frames, neutral frames and negative frames. Table 7 presents the sampled stories are presented in these new groupings, showing that more than 90 percent of the stories were framed in a neutral or positive way. This is a particularly interesting finding when considered alongside the topical

categories; it appears that even in stories about budgets and political strategies, pre-k /ece is treated as a good thing. A New Jersey reporter who was interviewed during the study made the remark that “pre-k is apple pie,” and these results support his point of view.

2. Demographics of Stories in the Study

Of great interest to the study are descriptive data about the stories – How long were they? Who wrote them? Where were they placed? Who was quoted? Tables 8-18 present such descriptive data.

Story length. The 1,176 stories coded for the study ranged from a set of simple phrases under a photo to a complex, multi-stage feature. Table 8 shows the mean story length for each newspaper in the study, with means ranging from 323 words in Chicago to 991 words in Baltimore. The overall mean for coded stories is 635, shown in Table 9, or what would be thought of as a traditional 16-inch story.

Table 10 divides the stories into two groups, long and short, using 500 words—about 12 column inches—as the divide. This division yielded 723 short stories and 453 long stories. Table 10 also checks for the influence of big enrollments on story length, testing the assumption that communities with a large investment in early education will result in more newspaper space on this issue. The table shows no significant difference in story length between high-enrollment (over 25,000 children served in the state) and low-enrollment (under 25,000 served).

Placement. Table 11 shows that most of the coded stories appeared in the metro or local section of their respective newspapers. More than one-third, 39 percent, was coded in the “metro/local/state” category, while 26 percent were placed in the front or “A” section. An interesting finding is that the next most common placement was in “special sections,” often found to be zoned editions of the newspaper that are produced once weekly for suburban audiences. This category accounted for 12 percent of the coded stories, suggesting that content of zoned editions, like the content of editorial pages, may deserve further study.

Page placement is examined in Table 12, which shows that 332 of the sampled stories achieved front-page placement in the section in which they appeared. This means that 28 percent of all coded stories were prominently placed, particularly the 80 stories that were found on A-1. Many of these prominent stories focused on federal, state and local budgets or legislation.

Writers and their sources. Table 13 indicates that many early education stories are written by non-staff writers. Only 58 percent of authors were coded as “staff writers,” with the largest other category being “Others”—a catch-all category that accounted in large part for writers of opinion pieces and letters to the editor. One third of writers were in this category.

Also surprising were findings in Table 14, which show that 46 percent of writers do not include sources who were experts in education

and particularly in early education; data in Table 15 suggest that many of these non-experts are politicians, who were found to be the most the frequently quoted figures in our study. Political figures outnumbered both education and community officials in the count of official sources quoted.

Table 16 shows that 62 percent of stories used quotes from unofficial sources. Most were from parents and other adults. Only 6 percent of sampled stories used quotes from children.

Like children, documents and printed resources were cited as sources far less frequently than expected. No such outside sources were used in 32 percent of the coded stories. Both survey results and academic research, such as that found in journals, were cited in 8 percent of stories, while books were cited in 2 percent. The most commonly used reference resource was in the category “legislation/regulations/laws” (25 percent) and “other” (24 percent).

Table 18 shows the only gender difference found in the study, showing that stories with a female author are significantly more likely to quote parents and children. All other analyses showed that men and women reporters behave similarly in covering early childhood education. Men and women are equally likely to cover such issues, equally likely to appear in the front pages and sections, and equally likely to cover particular topics.

Finally, Table 19 shows the geographic emphasis of the coded stories. Most — some two thirds of the articles -- had a local emphasis,

while the rest were fairly evenly divided between state and national categories. Less than 1 percent had an international emphasis.

B. The Case Studies

Four of the five cities chosen for case studies team with legislative activity and/or public investment in early childhood education. They also represent a range of regions and city sizes. Rather than sampling, each case study researcher read the entire population of stories published in his or her assigned newspaper to critically analyze the issues covered and the approaches taken by journalists in those cities.

Following is background research on pre-k in each city and our case-by-case report of findings:

Atlanta

Background: This is a shining city in the New South, the best of the New South, but it is in a state with the lowest average SAT scores in the United States. To counter academic problems in Georgia, Gov. Zell Miller proposed a state lottery in 1993 that would fund universal pre-kindergarten and college scholarships now called the Hope Scholarships. Both programs have been successful. With lottery funds, publicly funded pre-k classes have been established in churches and schools throughout the state. Any student with a B average in high school is given tuition remission in a state-funded college. The success of these programs has been expensive, however, and lottery funds are straining to cover costs.

Analysis: From the year 2000, 103 stories were analyzed along with 139 stories from 2003. They were all from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the major newspaper in the state capital. Many of these stories dealt with the increasingly complicated financing of the Hope Scholarship program and only peripherally mentioned pre-k and early childhood education. Governance was the topic of 40 percent of the stories, matched by funding, the topic of another 40 percent of the stories. Education accounted for only 10 percent of the story topics, with the remaining 10 percent being divided among profile and event coverage. Critical reading revealed that coverage of pre-k in Atlanta is directly tied to coverage of the Hope Scholarship program, which gets most of the press. Both pre-k and Hope Scholarship coverage are largely political because politicians appear to enjoy talking about how good they are for the people of Georgia. Serious coverage of teaching and learning in pre-k was not found. There were several excellent stories about transportation problems encountered by young preschool children who must ride the bus.

Buffalo, N.Y.

Background: Buffalo is the second largest city in the state of New York, strategically located on the Canadian border at Niagara Falls. Historically a city struggling with poverty, Buffalo was among the first U.S. sites for Head Start. Head Start centers were established in Buffalo in 1966 and continue to operate successfully. In addition, statewide universal pre-kindergarten was mandated in New York State in 1997. It has been gradually phased in, and scaled back,

because of limited state budgets. News articles analyzed came from *The Buffalo News*.

Analysis: The case study included 44 stories from the year 2000 and 40 stories from 2003. In both years, well over half the stories dealt with governance and funding. Other topics were politics, poverty and proposed national changes to Head Start. Less than 10 percent of stories had to do with teaching and learning. In the year 2003, the only stories concerning education were letters to the editor. In one notable story, the headline was “pre-k Kept, Sports Cut.” The entire text of the story is devoted to the fact that sports programs in high schools would be cut in the upcoming year’s budget with no mention beyond the first paragraph of pre-k. The researcher noted that many stories were written by non-staffers, no stories were substantially about education and that many opportunities to discuss pre-k were missed.

Los Angeles

Background: Los Angeles is the largest city in California, a state in which the child poverty rate, at 23 percent, exceeds the national average. Nearly one of every six poor children in the United States lives in California. State spending on children under 6, however, is at a rate twice the national average. In 1998, the state dedicated tobacco tax funds for special purposes, including pre-k for 4-year-olds. Only about 10 percent of those eligible are enrolled.

In general, early childhood education is seen as a social benefit, especially where low-income and immigrant communities are concerned. Head Start is a prominent feature in California’s educational landscape and appears often in

stories about early childhood education. Pre-k supplements existing Head Start programs.

Analysis: Researchers analyzed 146 stories from the year 2000 and 63 stories from the year 2003. The surplus of stories in the year 2000 was due in part to an automobile accident that killed several pre-k children and was covered extensively. In general, coverage was evenly divided among the topics of politics, funding and education with more coverage of education seen in Los Angeles than in the other case studies. Most page one stories focused on the politics of pre-k and on budgets, rather than on education. In fact, in 2003, no stories at all were found about early education or child development. Also unlike some other cities, *Los Angeles Times* readers saw few editorials or op-ed pieces related to pre-k or early childhood education.

Newark, N.J.

Background: The story of pre-k education in New Jersey largely has been played out in court. In 1973, the state Supreme Court ruled that school funding formulas put too much emphasis on property taxes, resulting in discriminatory spending patterns and inequities for students in poor districts. In 1998, the court prescribed early education as part of its remedy. The landmark ruling, known as *Abbott v. Burke*, required high-quality, intensive preschool as part of a broader package to level the playing field for disadvantaged children. These pre-k programs are offered to all 3- and 4-year-olds in districts where at least 40 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. There currently are 31 so-called Abbott districts, many of them in Newark. New Jersey also supports pre-k

through a second initiative, the Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid. This allows an additional 102 districts to offer half-day pre-k.

Analysis: Researchers examined 40 stories from the year 2000 and 60 stories from 2003, all from the *Newark Star-Ledger*. Funding was the topic of 45 percent of the stories, followed by governance with 25 percent of the stories. Education and politics evenly split the remaining 30 percent. Overall, researchers found excellent coverage of the courts' involvement in pre-k and of funding issues. However, few stories were seen concerning pre-k curriculum, students, teachers or parents. Some important issues go unaddressed, such as child development and the cost effectiveness of early intervention. It appears that the *Star-Ledger* provides good coverage of schools in a highly competitive market, with *The New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in its circulation area.

Tulsa

Background: Oklahoma is the top state in the nation in the percentage of 4-year-old children attending public preschool programs. Established in 1998, voluntary, universal pre-k programs adhere to a state law that limits classes to 20 students and requires a 1-to-10 adult/student ratio. Preschool teachers have college degrees and are certified educators, while teaching assistants are trained in early childhood education. Tulsa Public Schools is the largest school district in Oklahoma and 60 percent of its 4-year-olds participate, either directly or through a Head Start collaborative program. A Georgetown University study cited Tulsa as a nationally significant model of early childhood education. As recently as the year 2000, an Oklahoma Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Education

estimated 52,000 young, poor children under 5 were at risk of impaired brain development because of inadequate nutrition and health care and environmental toxins. Oklahoma was leading the nation in worsening poverty among its youngest children, had high levels of teen pregnancies and unintended pregnancies and the lowest percentage of pediatricians willing to accept Medicaid patients.

Analysis: Stories from the *Tulsa World* were analyzed. Researchers read 210 stories from the year 2000 and 234 stories from 2003. The editorial pages were filled with issues relating to pre-k and early childhood education. Most editorials were vehement advocate of early education. Opponents often were ridiculed or described in a negative way. Outside of the editorial pages, the newspaper's focus was on funding and governance of pre-k and early childhood education. These topics accounted for 70 percent of the stories that were studied. Only 13 percent of stories focused on education.

C. Reporter Interviews

The reporter makes a huge difference, our content analysis showed. We saw some outstanding stories, making it evident that individual reporters had developed an interest in the topic of pre-k and were mining it. After making attempts to contact 80 reporters, we finally cornered some two dozen who, even then, were scarcely willing to talk to us about early childhood education. Most were quick to say "that's not my job" or "I don't do that." Their beats ranged from housing to the statehouse. Typically, we had their names because they had inadvertently mentioned pre-k in a story. One well-informed journalist whose

story had appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times* turned out to be a local minister who had written an op-ed piece on the value of early education. Another was a calendar editor who was well informed of events at a local school.

One common theme among the reporters we contacted was a desire to get their stories placed on the front page, which is understandable. And they realized that early childhood education was not a “big-time” story. Maybe that’s why they were so quick to tell us that the focus of their usual work was something else. One *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter said of editors’ response to early childhood education stories: “People don’t jump up and down and say ‘Oh wow!’ ” The reporter added, “This is the real world.” A *Los Angeles Times* reporter said, “My personal feeling is that this topic doesn’t get enough respect because it’s not macho, or perhaps it seems too cerebral, too academic. It is a hard topic to make interesting; it is a hard thing for newspapers to do well.... It seems it’s not part of the culture any more. When the Clintons were in office, these issues were discussed. Didn’t Hilary have a conference on brain development? I don’t think the Bushes are interested in children -- they don’t vote.”

The habit of journalists to follow the leader is evident in pre-k coverage as it is with other issues, particularly politics. Sometimes this works out well for pre-k coverage, as in Georgia in the early 1990s when charismatic Gov. Miller led the state to fund pre-k through a new lottery system and in 2000 when Gov. Frank Keating of Oklahoma formed a task force that paved the way for the state’s national leadership in early education. In both these cases, journalists followed the leader and the leaders put early education on the agenda. President George W.

Bush's landmark education law, called No Child Left Behind, also has generated much coverage for topics concerning school readiness.

Like political leadership, conflict is a topic likely to make news. It's lacking in early childhood education, making it of less interest to journalists and their editors. For example, a Minneapolis journalist noted that the issue of early childhood education topped the legislative agenda. He said: "It's gotten a lot of bipartisan support in Minnesota – Republicans and Democrats. It's a matter now of trying to figure out do we have the money to pay for it. So there's some disagreement on that. But philosophically, it's kind of like apple pie here these days." Coverage, then, diminished because conflict was absent.

When there is conflict, reporters say that early education can get hot. One reporter told this story: "Our new Head Start leader got canned; the next one too. Then the feds took over. It's a mess. I went to my editor and said 'hey, we've got to cover this.'"

The issue is gendered, reporters say. "The children and family beat seems to have a low status within the paper. Women and children was not a manly thing to do. When some news story came that involved women and children, they would always come to me," a veteran woman reporter at a large newspaper said.

Journalists acknowledged that while their papers may have clusters of reporters and editors who focused solely on education, the issue of pre-k and early education tended to fall through the cracks or get little notice. Often early education stories are picked up by general assignment reporters or those who cover the statehouse, social service agencies and even the police department.

Some journalists say that the issue is overshadowed by “all that’s going on with older kids.” Other journalists found themselves covering pre-k as part of a beat that focuses on housing, African-American affairs and health.

Editors are more interested in coverage of government, whether regulations, policies and politics, reporters say. Traditional stories of budgets, taxes and the legal system also take precedence with editors, they say. When it comes to pre-k, “I don’t think it’s something they (editors) have as emphasis,” observed a Florida-based editorial writer.

Overall, interviews with journalists reveal the need for a revision in the structure of education reporting, which has traditionally been oriented to K-12. Several reporters mentioned newsroom changes designed to improve education coverage. One young reporter said, “We are a newly formed education team ... before, we were Balkanized.” She said that people with interest in early education previously were found on different beats but now meet together. Many people in their personal lives have realized that education begins well before kindergarten. Somehow, that personal knowledge needs to permeate the newsroom to match with the reality of daily life, the reporter said.

Some reporters clearly saw the importance of covering early education. “I want to focus on things that affect people’s lives long-term. Some papers focus on the sexy issue, the short-term issue. But I want to make a difference by covering children,” a reporter said. Another reporter ended his interview by saying, “As a parent, and as a thoughtful person, I know coverage of early education is worthwhile.... Disadvantaged kids can benefit. We know this.”

CONCLUSION

It's clear from all three parts of our study that early childhood education is part of personal life, but it has only just begun to be part of public life. American culture is just now adjusting to 3- and 4-year-olds regularly attending school. Journalists, like other people, are only beginning to think in terms of P-12 instead of K-12. News coverage reflects this gradual paradigm shift. When pre-k and traditional news values intersect, then early education becomes news. In states where pre-k is connected to powerful people, engaged in public action, coverage is more likely to be more comprehensive.

No matter where pre-k is covered, however, many important facts are overlooked such as the potential to improve later lives of pre-k graduates. In every setting, pre-k is overshadowed by interests in other parts of the educational system that seem more compelling, such as high school retention and the availability of college funding. Another complication in pre-k coverage is confusion over the roles of churches and well-established Head Start programs. The participation of these institutions in early education may cause confusion; certainly they make pre-k different from other forms of public education and more challenging for reporters to cover.

It is far simpler for journalists to stick with coverage of government actions in such stories as those about board of education meetings and legislative budgets. News stories on these events are quick to satisfy any newspaper's need for timely public affairs journalism. So most reporters stay in the safe realm of coverage, rather than venture into unfamiliar territory where they may reap few benefits. Stories, for example, on brain research or reading readiness are likely to be difficult stories to produce without

immediate tangible reward. After producing such a story, one reporter said that her editors reacted "...not at all; this was just another (story) coming down the pike."

In journalism schools, reporters-in-training are taught formulaic writing focused on a set of established news values. Usually they are rewarded for stories about prominent people engaged in important activities, making it unlikely that they would value a story about early education. It should come as no surprise that many of the stories we analyzed ended up in our sample by accident as some important person or activity was really the focus of the story.

In closing, the present research offers answers to the following questions that were stated in the beginning of this report:

1.) What are the characteristics and themes of typical coverage of pre-k and early childhood education?

Most coverage concerns legislation, politics, funding and facilities. Most coverage is peripheral or incidental. Therefore, a good deal of coverage is inexperienced and fairly superficial.

2.) What are the characteristics and themes of coverage in cities where dramatic initiatives or changes have taken place concerning pre-k /ece?

Case studies of coverage in five cities showed the same trends as in the general coverage: Most attention goes to political (or, in the case of NJ, legal) issues; much copy is devoted to governance, funding, facilities and announcements of

events. Spikes in coverage were seen when new legislation or funding were debated or at election time; in Los Angeles, a spike occurred when a car crashed into a preschool and killed several kids. A serendipitous finding was that at times, much coverage came in the form of letters to the editor and op-ed pieces. Might the public care more about these issues than do the papers?

3.) How do newsroom staffs, processes and standards shape coverage of pre-k /ECE?

Findings here indicated that pre-k /ece coverage may fall through the cracks in newsroom assignments. Rarely is anyone assigned to the beat, or the beat is attached to something else. The old model of K-12 is dominant and pre-k sometimes seems extraneous. Even K-16 seems more powerful a determinant of coverage. Some newsrooms are rearranging to cope with the "cracks." Other newsroom forces that work against increased coverage of pre-k/ece are confusion about Head Start and pre-k /ece, confusion about church and public cooperation on pre-k /ece (who can go? who's welcome? to whom does it belong if it's in a church?) and a general feeling that, although important, pre-k /ece is not very newsworthy.

APPENDIX A

Pre-Kindergarten and Early Childhood Education

Pre-Coding Instructions:

early childhood education, pre-k and pre-kindergar!

Do Not Code: advertisements, weddings and obituaries

Variable

number Column Category names and Codes

V1		<u>Newspaper</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The Baltimore Sun2. The Boston Globe3. The Buffalo News4. The Chicago Tribune5. The Columbus Dispatch6. The Denver Post7. The Hartford Courant8. The Houston Chronicle9. The Los Angeles Times10. The Miami Herald11. The New York Times12. Newsday13. The Omaha World Herald14. The Pittsburgh Post Gazette15. The San Diego Union Tribune16. The San Francisco Chronicle17. The Seattle Times18. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch19. The St. Petersburg Times20. The Star-Tribune (Minneapolis)21. The Tampa Tribune22. The Times-Picayune (New Orleans)
V2		<u>ID Number of Story</u> Beginning with 001, assign unique 3-digit number to each news story coded
V3		<u>Date</u> Code month, date, and last two numbers of year
V4		<u>Day of the week</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Sunday2. non-Sunday
V5		<u>Dateline of story</u> Enter name of city
V6		<u>Placement of Story - Section</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1.front section

- (top national / intern'l / local news)
- 2. Metro / local / state
- 3. Arts & living / style / features
- 4. Sports
- 5. Business
- 6. Health and fitness
- 7. Home and garden
- 8. Travel
- 9. Food / Cooking
- 10. Viewpoints / Outlook /
Opinion/ editorial
- 11. Technology
- 12. Special section (county specific local news)
- 13. other / unknown

- V7 Location-Page #
- V8 Length of Story
Number of words
- V9 Focus on Early Childhood Issues
 - 1.major
 - 2. peripheral
- V10 Author's status
 - 1. staff writer
 - 2. special to ...
 - 3. wire service
 - 4. others
- V11 Author's gender
 - 1. female
 - 2. male
 - 3. male and female
 - 4. unknown
- V12 Genre
 - 1. News article
 - 2. analysis
 - 3. reviews
 - 4. editorial/op-ed
 - 5. letters to editor
 - 6. feature / profile / interview
 - 7. digest/ briefs/roundups
 - 8. Other
- V13 Geographic focus of Story
 - 1. local
 - 2. state
 - 3. national

	4. international
V14	<u>Head Start mentioned</u> 1. yes 2. no
V15	<u>Primary Topic</u> 1. Literacy/reading 2. Community event 3. Child abuse/crime 4. Training/unemployment 5. Field trip/extracurricular 6. Funding for pre-K 7. Head Start 8. Health care for pre-K 9. Politics/legislation/state budget 10. Curriculum/ed approach for pre-k 11. Racial issues in pre-k 12. Religious issues in pre-k 13. Income/socioeconomic status 14. Standards or testing in pre-k 15. Technologies for pre-k 16. Readiness of pre-k students 17. Math 18. Profile 19. Pre-k teacher credentials, cert. 20. Facilities for pre-k 21. Education materials for pre-k 22. Parental participation in pre-k 23. Disabilities
V16	<u>Secondary Topic</u> Use same codings as for V15
	<u>PRE-K Terminology -code number of times the term appears.</u>
V17	optional / voluntary / open
V18	compulsory / mandatory / required
V19	universal
V20	statewide
V21	national
V22	child care / day care
V23	P - 3/P-12/P-16
V24	K-3/K12/K16
V25	community-based
V26	private (profit, nonprofit)
V27	school-based
V28	other
	<u>Other Terminology (code 1 for yes, 2 for no, and record on a separate sheet</u>
V29	1. metaphors (what are they?)

- V30 2. anecdotes (what are they?)
V31 3. jargon (what is it?)
- V32 Use of Expert/Official Sources
1. yes
2. no
- V33 Authorities Quoted
1. Political figure
2. education officer
3. community official
4. doctor
5. lawyer
6. other
- V34 Others Quoted
1. Children
2. parents
3. other
- V35 Other Sources
1. books
2. academic research, journals
3. surveys/ data sets
4. legislation / regulations / laws
5. other
- V36 Graphics / pictures / charts
1. yes
2. no
- V37 First Appropriate Frame
1. Pre-k/ece is good for society
2. Pre-k/ece provides broad economic benefit
3. Pre-k/ece is expensive
4. Parents should shoulder some costs for pre-k/ece
5. Government should have a role in pre-k/ece
6. Safety and well-being of children in pre-k/ece is problematic
7. Quality pre-k/ece has positive educational impacts
8. There is disagreement about what make a quality pre-k/ece program
9. Pre-k/ece helps level the playing field for children of low-income families
10. Other
- V38 Second Appropriate Frame
Use same codes as V37
- V39 State Funding Available?
(use list given by Dr. McAdams)
1. yes
2. no

APPENDIX D

Table 1. Number of stories sampled for 2000 and 2003, by newspaper.

Count

		2000	2003	Total
NEWSPAPERS	The Baltimore Sun	31	25	56
	The Boston Globe	30	27	57
	The Buffalo News	30	30	60
	The Chicago Tribune	37	33	70
	The Columbus Dispatch	21	18	39
	The Denver Post	30	29	59
	The Hartford Courant	30	21	51
	The Houston Chronicle	16	23	39
	The Los Angeles Times	41	12	53
	The Miami Herald	34	32	66
	The New York Times	25	12	37
	Newsday	24	14	38
	The Omaha World Herald	30	30	60
	The Pittsburgh Post Gazette	30	30	60
	The San Diego Union Tribune	25	23	48
	The San Francisco Chronicle	5	7	12
	The Seattle Times	27	33	60
	The St. Louis Post-Dispatch	32	30	62
	The St. Petersburg Times	30	30	60
	The Star-Tribune (Minneapolis)	28	27	55
	The Tampa Tribune	20	20	40
	The Times-Picayune (New Orleans)	20	20	40
	The Atlanta Journal	30	24	54
Total		626	550	1176

Table 2. Focus of stories, by size of pre-k enrollment in circulation area.

Count

		size of enrollment		Total
		Under 25k	Over 25k	
Focus on	Major	316	253	569
ECE Issues	Peripheral	394	213	607
Total		710	466	1176

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Table 3. Sampled news stories sorted by story type.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	News article	612	52.0	52.0	52.0
	Analysis	59	5.0	5.0	57.1
	Reviews	12	1.0	1.0	58.1
	Editorial/op-ed	110	9.4	9.4	67.4
	Letters to editor	60	5.1	5.1	72.5
	Feature/profile/ interview	148	12.6	12.6	85.1
	Digest/briefs/ roundups	140	11.9	11.9	97.0
	Other	35	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Sampled news stories sorted by story topic.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Literacy/reading	46	3.9	3.9	3.9
	Community event	63	5.4	5.4	9.3
	Child abuse/crime	21	1.8	1.8	11.1
	Training/unemployment	18	1.5	1.5	12.6
	Field trip/extracurricular	22	1.9	1.9	14.5
	Funding for pre-k	140	11.9	11.9	26.4
	Head Start	79	6.7	6.7	33.1
	Health care for pre-k	14	1.2	1.2	34.3
	Politics/legislation/state budget	206	17.5	17.5	51.8
	Curriculum/ed approach for pre-k	63	5.4	5.4	57.1
	Racial issues in pre-k	2	.2	.2	57.3
	Religious issues in pre-k	6	.5	.5	57.8
	Income/socioeconomic status	21	1.8	1.8	59.6
	Standards or testing in pre-k	22	1.9	1.9	61.5
	Technologies for pre-k	8	.7	.7	62.2
	Readiness of pre-k students	26	2.2	2.2	64.4
	Profile	36	3.1	3.1	67.4
	pre-k teacher credentials, cert.	17	1.4	1.4	68.9
	Facilities for pre-k	83	7.1	7.1	75.9
	Education materials for pre-k	5	.4	.4	76.4
	Parental participation in pre-k	28	2.4	2.4	78.7
	Disabilities	14	1.2	1.2	79.9
	Other	236	20.1	20.1	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 5. Sampled news stories sorted by simplified topic categories.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Funding	223	19.0	23.7	23.7
	Politics	206	17.5	21.9	45.6
	Academics	170	14.5	18.1	63.7
	Standards	39	3.3	4.1	67.9
	Social Issues	96	8.2	10.2	78.1
	Head Start	79	6.7	8.4	86.5
	Other	127	10.8	13.5	100.0
	Total	940	79.9	100.0	
	Other	236	20.1		
Total	1176	100.0			

Table 6. Sampled news stories sorted by first appropriate frame.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	pre-k/ece is good for society	204	17.3	17.3	17.3
	pre-k/ece provides broad economic benefit	13	1.1	1.1	18.5
	pre-k/ece is expensive	30	2.6	2.6	21.0
	Parents should shoulder some costs for pre-k/ece	16	1.4	1.4	22.4
	Government should have a role in pre-k/ece	195	16.6	16.6	38.9
	Safety and well-being of children in pre-k/ece is problematic	25	2.1	2.1	41.1
	Quality pre-k/ece has positive educational impacts	105	8.9	8.9	50.0
	There is disagreement about what makes quality pre-k/ece	40	3.4	3.4	53.4
	pre-k/ece helps level the playing field for low-income kids	59	5.0	5.0	58.4
	Other	489	41.6	41.6	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 7. Sampled news stories sorted by simplified frame categories.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	positive frame	381	32.4	32.4	32.4
	neutral frame	700	59.5	59.5	91.9
	negative frame	95	8.1	8.1	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 8. Average length of stories coded for each newspaper.

Length

paper	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
The Baltimore Sun	991.64	56	1219.160
The Boston Globe	909.58	57	867.598
The Buffalo News	482.40	60	313.001
The Chicago Tribune	323.29	70	192.773
The Columbus Dispatch	656.82	39	486.268
The Denver Post	669.19	59	415.885
The Hartford Courant	660.92	51	858.182
The Houston Chronicle	538.41	39	348.183
The Los Angeles Times	655.51	53	459.206
The Miami Herald	631.45	66	419.711
The New York Times	785.76	37	497.798
Newsday	836.87	38	460.246
The Omaha World Herald	501.03	60	353.353
The Pittsburgh Post Gazette	495.30	60	341.721
The San Diego Union Tribune	694.77	48	354.344
The San Francisco Chronicle	892.08	12	979.916
The Seattle Times	524.55	60	372.316
The St. Louis Post- Dispatch	455.48	62	386.747
The St. Petersburg Times	737.65	60	517.822
The Star-Tribune (Minneapolis)	682.62	55	409.007
The Tampa Tribune	649.82	40	346.225
The Times-Picayune (New Orleans)	624.23	40	380.459
The Atlanta Journal	646.39	54	304.630
Total	635.43	1176	545.168

Table 9. Overall mean, median and mode for story length over all newspapers.

Length

N	Valid	1176
	Missing	0
Mean		635.43
Median		532.00
Mode		200

Table 10. Numbers of short and long news stories by size of enrollment in circulation area.

Count

		size of enrollment		Total
		Under 25k	Over 25k	
short-long stories	short story	444	279	723
	long story	266	187	453
Total		710	466	1176

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Table 11. Sampled stories sorted by section placement.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Front section (top national/ international/ local news)	301	25.6	25.6	25.6
	Metro/local/state	458	38.9	38.9	64.5
	Arts & living/ style/features	57	4.8	4.8	69.4
	Sports	8	.7	.7	70.1
	Business	15	1.3	1.3	71.3
	Health and fitness	4	.3	.3	71.7
	Home and garden	8	.7	.7	72.4
	Travel	2	.2	.2	72.5
	Viewpoints/ Outlook/Opinion/ Editorial	91	7.7	7.7	80.3
	Technology	1	.1	.1	80.4
	Special section (county specific local news)	141	12.0	12.0	92.3
	Other/Unknown	90	7.7	7.7	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 12. Front- and non-front stories by section placement.

				Total
		Page 1	not on page 1	
Placement Section	Front section (top national/international/ local news)	80	221	301
	Metro/local/state	141	317	458
	other	111	306	417
Total		332	844	1176

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Table 13. Sampled news stories sorted by status of reporter/writer.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Staff writer	677	57.6	57.6	57.6
	Special to	69	5.9	5.9	63.4
	Wire service	64	5.4	5.4	68.9
	Others	366	31.1	31.1	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 14. Stories containing expert sources vs. stories without experts.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	636	54.1	54.1	54.1
	No	540	45.9	45.9	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 15. Sampled stories sorted by types of authorities quoted.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Political figure	485	41.2	41.2	41.2
	Education officer	421	35.8	35.8	77.0
	Community official	93	7.9	7.9	84.9
	Doctor	18	1.5	1.5	86.5
	Lawyer	9	.8	.8	87.2
	Other	150	12.8	12.8	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 16. Sampled stories sorted by unofficial sources quoted.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Nobody	449	38.2	38.2	38.2
	Children	65	5.5	5.5	43.7
	parents	135	11.5	11.5	55.2
	other	527	44.8	44.8	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 17. Sampled stories sorted by references and printed resources.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Nothing	380	32.3	32.3	32.3
	books	27	2.3	2.3	34.6
	academic research, journals	101	8.6	8.6	43.2
	surveys/ data sets	90	7.7	7.7	50.9
	legislation / regulations / laws	287	24.4	24.4	75.3
	other	291	24.7	24.7	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

Table 18. Tendency to quote parents and kids, by gender of author.

Count

		Female author		Total
		Female author	other author	
Parents, kids quoted	Yes, kids, parents quoted	130	53	183
	no kids or parents	374	310	684
Total		504	363	867

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Table 19. Sampled stories sorted by geographic emphasis.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Local	782	66.5	66.5	66.5
	State	184	15.6	15.6	82.1
	National	204	17.3	17.3	99.5
	International	6	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	1176	100.0	100.0	

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