



Evidence in Action: 20 Years of the Educare Model

A Summary of Selected Findings Published by the UNC Frank
Porter Graham National Evaluation Partner Team and Local
Evaluation Partners Over 20 Years of Collaboration

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Evidence in Action: 20 Years of the Educare Model

Introduction

The first Educare school opened on Chicago's south side in 2000. It was a comprehensive early childhood education (ECE) model designed to improve outcomes for children from birth to age 5 who were growing up in poverty, while also strengthening families, classrooms, and local systems. The Educare model was not simply a preschool curriculum, but an integrated service and implementation framework built on high-quality teaching, continuity of care, intensive professional development, family engagement, and health and support services. What distinguished Educare from other ECE programs at that time, such as Head Start, was its emphasis on systematic data use.

With funding from the Buffett Early Childhood Fund and local philanthropies, the Educare model was soon replicated by programs across the country, and in 2006 was a network of 5 schools with several more scheduled to open. Because data-driven continuous quality improvement was foundational to the model, both funders and network leaders determined it was time to launch a comprehensive, multi-site evaluation. The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) was selected as the National Evaluation Partner (NEP). The FPG team engaged with program directors, their local evaluators, and national and local funders to establish a logic model to guide the evaluation study. Together, the group chose potential observation and assessment tools for the protocol of the evaluation study. By the 2006-07 school year, local evaluators began pilot testing measures, data collection procedures, and management processes. [A complete list of local evaluators and their team staff over the 20 years is included after the references.]

Data were intended to be used for both internal and external purposes. The primary internal purposes were to give schools a snapshot of how they were functioning and to guide classroom and service improvement and child and family individualization. At the network level, data were used to help guide network-level program improvement and technical assistance and to raise funds and cultivate new schools. External purposes for data were to showcase the high quality of early childhood education (ECE) practices occurring in Educare programs, contribute to the national literature on ECE, and provide data for advocacy. Data were collected and shared with school teams via Research Program Partnership team meetings, data memos and webinars written and conducted by FPG, and data dialogues at in-person meetings of program leaders and local evaluators. Initially, three meetings were held each year which—as the network grew to 26 schools—gradually reduced to one annual meeting.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the evidence gained over the years of FPG's participation in the network as the NEP, as published through 45 peer-reviewed papers. We also highlight the implications that these findings have for program practices and future evaluation efforts. The report includes sections summarizing longitudinal studies of child outcomes, executive function outcomes, classroom practices, family engagement, dual language learners, and studies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the early years of the evaluation, in response to partner and funder questions and because Educare was in an early implementation phase, evaluation publications focused mainly on the Educare logic model and its implementation, so we begin there.

The Educare Model and Its Implementation

Several publications demonstrate that the Educare model is distinguished by its public-private partnership structure and by a research-program partnership (RPP) that connects practitioners, evaluators, and leaders in continuous improvement (Horm, Yazejian, Kennel, and Jackson, 2017; Ucus, Acar, and Raikes, 2017; Yazejian, Bryant, and Kennel, 2013). Rather than treating quality as a static outcome, the model conceptualizes it as something built through ongoing organizational learning, implementation support, and shared responsibility across stakeholders. In this sense, Educare functions both as a service model for children and families and as a demonstration model for early childhood systems change.

A major strength of the Educare model is its emphasis on data utilization as a core mechanism of improvement rather than as an auxiliary reporting requirement. The papers focused on data utilization consistently showed that data are most useful when they are embedded in daily practice, used collaboratively, and applied across multiple levels of the early childhood system (Soliday Hong, Yazejian, Guss, Stein, Connors, Horm, Kainz, et al. 2019; Yazejian and Bryant, 2013). Guss, Norris, Horm, Monroe, and Wolfe (2013) demonstrated that classroom observation data can support improvement only when evaluators and program staff develop respectful partnerships, communicate openly, and create opportunities for shared interpretation. Their work suggests that data are more likely to be accepted and acted upon when staff trust the process, understand the purpose of the information, and have a meaningful voice in how results are used. Similarly, Guss, Horm, Lang, Krehbiel, Petty, Austin et al. (2013) showed that teachers can use data as a formative professional development tool to improve classroom environments and support children's learning. Yazejian and Bryant (2013) further argued that effective data use must be embedded, collaborative, and comprehensive, rather than limited to child assessment or compliance monitoring.

Early publications demonstrated that Educare's data system was successful because it extended beyond internal program improvement to support transitions, family engagement, and broader system learning. Stein, Freel, Hansen, Pacchiano, and Eiland-Williford (2013) showed how follow-up data on children and families can be used to refine kindergarten transition supports, strengthen early mathematics instruction, and improve family engagement after children leave the program. This work illustrates that data are most powerful when they inform not only what happens inside the classroom, but also how programs respond to children and families over time and across settings (Stein et al., 2013). Soliday Hong et al. (2019) broadened this perspective by stating that collaboration in early care and education should be understood as shared, data-informed activities among stakeholders working toward common goals across levels of the system. In this view, collaboration around data is not simply coordination or communication, but it is an active process through which program actors, families, and system partners jointly interpret evidence and pursue shared outcomes.

Another recurring theme in publications about Educare's RPP is that effective data use depends on leadership and organizational capacity. Directors and other school leaders participate in decisions about measures and play a pivotal role in modeling data use, building staff data literacy, and creating a culture in which data are viewed as a resource for learning rather than as an external judgment (Guss et al., 2013; Yazejian and Bryant, 2013). The articles emphasize that implementation quality is supported by staffing, coaching, reflective supervision, technical assistance, and stable infrastructure (Horm, 2017; Ucus et al., 2017; Yazejian et al., 2013). Yazejian

and Bryant (2013) described how the model was replicated across sites through a staged implementation process supported by a national office, local evaluators, and the network itself. Horm, Yazejian et al. (2017) placed Educare's features (data use, high-quality teaching, intensive professional development, and family engagement) in a broader policy context, emphasizing that Educare is designed not only to serve enrolled children and families, but also to inform the field and contribute to systems-level improvement.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the Educare model succeeds when quality, collaboration, and continuous improvement are integrated. Evaluation of the model demonstrated that meaningful change does not occur simply because data are collected or because a program adopts a set of practices. Rather, improvement emerges through repeated cycles of observation, reflection, discussion, and follow-up, supported by strong leadership and a relational infrastructure that values trust and shared expertise. For ECE programs and policymakers, the implication is clear: if the goal is sustained improvement, then investment must extend beyond accountability systems to include the time, staffing, training, and partnerships needed to make data usable. Programs should aim to preserve fidelity to core components while allowing local responsiveness, and policies should support collaborative inquiry rather than relying on compliance alone. In this way, the Educare model presents early childhood improvement as a data-informed and system-oriented endeavor grounded in long-term commitment to learning and adaptation.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- **Leaders should invest in evaluation capacity** since high-quality data collection and interpretation are necessary for monitoring outcomes and improving practice. This means building routines for sharing, discussing, and applying data in ways that are understandable and useful to teachers, leaders, and families.
- **Treat data as a continuous improvement tool, not just a compliance requirement.** Early childhood programs should build routines for sharing, discussing, and applying data in ways that are understandable and useful to teachers, leaders, and families.
- **Invest in leadership development and coaching.** Directors and supervisors need support in data interpretation, reflective supervision, and instructional leadership so they can help staff translate findings into practice.
- **Use data to strengthen family engagement and transitions.** Programs should apply data to identify family needs, support kindergarten transitions, and promote continuity across home, school, and community settings.
- **Build collaborative cultures.** Staff should feel ownership over improvement efforts, and data should be used to support learning, reflection, and shared problem-solving rather than blame or external judgment.
- **Collaboration should be intentional and data-informed.** Effective early childhood systems depend on shared goals and shared use of information among teachers, leaders, evaluators, families, and community partners.

Longitudinal Studies of Child Outcomes

Demonstrating the effectiveness of the Educare intervention on children's language and cognition was initially challenged by the lack of a control group. To address this, two published manuscripts used the children's age of entry and program "dosage" as a quasi-experimental design. Eventually, with funding from multiple foundations and participation from 5 schools, we conducted the most stringent research design—a randomized controlled trial (RCT). Across these studies—summarized below—the evidence suggests that attendance in Educare is most consistently associated with gains in children's academic and language development, while effects on social–emotional outcomes are weaker and less consistent.

In the Educare RCT study, children assigned to the intervention showed significant advantages at ages 2 and 3 in auditory and expressive language, and at age 3 in early math skills and parent-reported behavioral problems (Yazejian, Bryant, Hans, Horm, St. Clair, File et al., 2017; Yazejian, Bryant, Kuhn, Burchinal, Horm, Hans et al, 2020). These effects were modest in magnitude, indicating meaningful early developmental benefits for children from low-income families. However, by age 5, no statistically significant treatment effects remained for child or parent outcomes, suggesting that the early gains were not detectable at kindergarten entry. The lack of effects at age 5 could have been due to significant attrition in the samples from four of the participating schools. However, the Tulsa team (Horm, Jeon, Clavijo, and Acton, 2022) successfully maintained their relatively large RCT sample and followed them up to third grade, finding that Educare children, compared to the control group, showed higher level skills in letter and word identification, vocabulary, oral comprehension, and math from kindergarten through Grade 3, even after adjusting for child, family, and classroom characteristics. They found no group differences for social–emotional skills. Executive functioning results were mixed, with advantages on one of two measures. Together, the three RCT papers suggest that Educare can support not only school readiness at kindergarten entry but also impact the continuation of academic gains into the elementary grades.

Two non-random studies added nuance to our knowledge of child outcomes by showing that the timing and duration of Educare exposure were both important, particularly for dual language learners (DLLs). Soliday Hong, Yazejian, and Bryant (2023) used propensity score analysis to show that children who entered Educare earlier, especially in toddlerhood, tended to have stronger English-language skills than later entrants, building on a previous study showing that earlier entry and longer participation were associated with higher receptive language scores for all children (Yazejian, Bryant, Freel, Burchinal et al., 2015). These benefits were especially pronounced for DLL children, who appeared to maintain language advantages through preschool, whereas later entrants improved but did not fully catch up. Importantly, neither study found evidence that Educare harmed Spanish-language development, suggesting support for additive bilingual development rather than language loss. Social–emotional findings were mixed—the studies reported slightly lower teacher-rated self-control or social–emotional skills among younger entrants, however these differences were within normative ranges and tended to diminish with longer participation. [In a 2016 paper by Guss, Jones Harden, Stein, Yazejian, and Forestieri focused on indicators of adversity—to be described later—a positive association of children's "dosage" of Educare with child outcomes was also found.]

Overall, these studies converge on a common conclusion: Educare, when participation begins early in life, can produce meaningful and, in some cases, sustained benefits for children’s language and academic development, particularly for those from low-income families and for DLLs. At the same time, the evidence for social–emotional effects has been limited and inconsistent, and the results of the RCT at age 5 (excluding Tulsa) underscore that early gains may fade without continued support. These combined findings highlight both the promise of early intervention and the importance of sustained, developmentally responsive educational experiences across the early childhood and early elementary years.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- **Prioritize early enrollment.** The strongest benefits were associated with earlier entry, especially in toddlerhood, so programs should support access as early as possible.
- **Focus on high-quality instruction and relationships.** The consistent language gains found in Educare underscore the importance of strong teaching, stable caregiving, and responsive interactions.
- **Support dual language learners intentionally.** Programs should use culturally and linguistically responsive practices that promote bilingual development rather than discouraging home-language use.
- **Monitor social–emotional development.** Although findings did not suggest harm, some small differences in self-regulation and behavior were observed, so practitioners should watch these domains closely and provide appropriate supports.
- **Plan for continuity over time.** Because early gains were not always sustained through age 5, programs should consider how to maintain progress across transitions and into later schooling.
- **Engage families as partners.** Strong school–family partnerships appear to be part of what makes high-quality ECE effective, so programs should invest in family outreach and communication.
- **Use the findings to support equity goals.** These results suggest that early, high-quality ECE can help reduce opportunity gaps, especially for children of low-income families and DLLs.

Children’s Executive Function Outcomes

Interest in assessment of children’s executive functioning (EF) skills increased during the early years of the Educare National Evaluation. Children’s working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility are considered essential for school readiness, social-emotional competence, and self-regulation. FPG and local evaluators piloted use of the venerable Pencil Tapping and Head, Toes, Knees, Shoulders (HTKS) tasks for 2 years but found them to be too challenging for 3-to-5-year-olds. Then a BECF-funded acceleration grant allowed five schools to continue piloting EF interventions and measures. These pilot and acceleration grant efforts resulted in four publications specifically focused on EF. Across these four studies, summarized below, results indicated that children’s EF and self-regulation were shaped by a combination of individual, relational, and family-context factors.

Palomino and Brudvig (2021) found that most Educare preschoolers performed in the average range on executive function tasks, with girls outperforming boys. Receptive English language skills and

DLL status were significant predictors of EF, even after accounting for demographic characteristics and attachment, suggesting that language-related competencies may support executive functioning in early childhood. In contrast, attachment to adults did not emerge as a significant predictor in that small sample. The remaining EF-focused studies emphasized the importance of relational and contextual influences on self-regulation.

Acar, Torquati, Raikes, and Rudasill (2020) found that teacher–child closeness was positively associated with self-regulation, whereas teacher–child conflict was negatively associated with it; moreover, low child regulatory temperament combined with high teacher conflict predicted the poorest self-regulation. Another Acar-led paper (Acar, Veziroglu-Celik, Garcia, Colgrove, Raikes, Gonen et al., 2019), including children in Turkey as well as from Educare schools, showed that teacher–child conflict (but not closeness) was associated with lower self-regulation among U.S. boys, while teacher–child closeness (but not conflict) was associated with self-regulation in Turkey. Finally, Encinger, Kutaka, Chernyavskiy, Acar, and Raikes (2020) showed that marginal food security was linked to higher parental stress, which in turn was associated with lower observed self-regulation in preschool children.

These four papers suggest that EF and self-regulation are influenced not only by child characteristics such as language and temperament, but also by the quality of teacher–child relationships and broader family stressors. They also suggest that children’s EF and self-regulation can be improved in comprehensive programs that combine relationship-based teaching, language support, and family-centered services.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- **Treat executive function and self-regulation as key developmental outcomes**, not secondary ones, and support them through daily routines and developmentally responsive instruction.
- **Prioritize warm, low-conflict teacher–child relationships**, since closeness supports self-regulation and conflict undermines it.
- **Invest in teacher coaching and reflective supervision** to help staff manage behavior supportively and reduce conflict.
- **Support teacher well-being**, because emotionally regulated teachers are more likely to create calm, responsive classrooms.
- **Recognize the link between language development and self-regulation**, and support both together and for multilingual children, support both home language and English.
- **Screen for food insecurity and other basic needs** and connect families to appropriate community supports since family stress can affect children’s self-regulation.

Family Dynamics and Parent-Child Relationships

Several Educare papers have addressed factors that affect parent-child relationships and/or how those relationships may affect children’s outcomes. Across these studies, parent-child relationships are seen as foundational to children’s early development and as operating within broader cultural, family, and programmatic contexts. The summarized studies below showed that relationship quality is multidimensional, encompassing closeness, conflict, enrichment, parental

distress, and parents' capacity for behavioral and attentional regulation. These dimensions are associated with children's social-emotional functioning, behavioral regulation, language, and school readiness. The importance of culturally valid measurement and interpretation were emphasized. The findings suggest that Educare participation can serve as a promotive context for children experiencing adversity, particularly when programs sustain family participation over time and address the factors that may interfere with positive parent-child relationships.

A central theme across these studies is that children's functioning is shaped by the quality of relationships in both family and school contexts, and that these associations are influenced by cultural and linguistic context. Ren, Garcia, Esteraich, Encinger, Raikes, and Acar (2019) found that among Educare families, parent-child conflict was associated with more behavioral concerns and lower executive function for children with U.S.-born parents, but not for children with Mexico-born parents, suggesting that the developmental significance of conflict may vary by parental nativity and cultural background. Similarly, Acar, Torquati, Garcia, and Ren (2018) reported that parent-child closeness was positively associated with children's behavioral regulation, while teacher-child conflict was negatively associated; children experiencing both low closeness at home and high conflict at school showed the poorest regulation. Extending this emphasis on context, Escalante-Barrios, Suarez-Enciso, Raikes, Davis, Garcia, and Gonen (2020) found that closeness and conflict were meaningful constructs in both U.S. and Turkish samples, the measure used did not function equivalently across languages and cultures, cautioning against direct cross-cultural comparisons without careful adaptation and validation. Together, these findings suggest that children's self-regulation is shaped by relational experiences across settings and that both family processes and measurement tools must be interpreted within culturally responsive frameworks.

Iruka, Jones Harden, Bingham, Esteraich, and Green (2018) complemented these studies by demonstrating that parenting is not a single construct but rather a constellation of practices and emotional qualities. Their latent profile analysis identified four distinct parenting profiles among low-income families, ranging from low enrichment/high distress to high enrichment/low distress. These profiles were associated with differences in children's preschool language, pre-academic, and behavioral outcomes, suggesting that children benefit most when emotional closeness is paired with cognitively enriching interactions and when parental distress is relatively low. This person-centered approach reinforced the idea that parenting quality is best understood as a pattern of strengths and risks rather than as a single score.

The role of parents' own histories and regulatory capacities was further examined by Guss, Morris, Bosler, Castle, Hays-Grudo, Horm, and Treat (2020). They found that parents who reported more adverse childhood experiences—such as abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction—also reported higher levels of conflict in their current relationships with their young children. This association was indirectly linked through parents' everyday executive functioning, including their ability to regulate behavior and attention. These findings provide a potential mechanism through which earlier family adversity may influence current parenting and suggest that interventions focused on parent-child relationships may be strengthened by addressing parents' past experiences and their effects on executive functioning. Thus, the study connects research on family adversity with research on parenting quality, indicating that reducing parent-child conflict may require support for parents' own emotional and behavioral regulation in addition to direct relationship-focused strategies.

Two papers led by Tulsa and Washington DC LEP team members (Guss, Jones Harden, Stein et al., 2016; Guss, Jones Harden, Yazejian, Weeden, and Ladner, 2016) emphasized the role of family adversity and program dosage in shaping child outcomes. Nearly half of Educare families reported at least one adversity and adversity was associated with weaker school readiness and poorer health outcomes, with mixed associations for social-emotional outcomes and no association with language. Yet, longer time in Educare was associated with better outcomes in several domains, suggesting that sustained participation may be promotive in the context of adversity. A companion article written with practice partners (Guss, Jones Harden, Yazejian et al., 2016) similarly argued that early childhood programs should identify and address adversity, incorporate it into instructional and support strategies, and retain high-risk families through targeted programming and professional development. The findings from Guss et al. (2020) extend this argument by suggesting that programs should also consider how parents' adverse childhood experiences and executive functioning may affect present-day parent-child interactions. Altogether, these studies position Educare and other early childhood programs as potentially buffering environments that can mitigate some of the developmental risks associated with family stress.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- **Look for ways to increase parent-child closeness and parent confidence**, since these dimensions are linked to stronger language, pre-academic, and behavioral outcomes; use coaching, home visiting, or relationship-based family engagement strategies.
- **Recognize that parenting is multidimensional** and shaped by stress, resources, and cultural context.
- **Address conflict without assuming it means the same thing in every family**, especially when working with immigrant or dual-language families and families experiencing adversity.
- **Ask families about norms, stressors, and communication styles** before labeling behavior as problematic.
- **Support both home and school relationships that are positive**; professional development can help teachers reduce conflict and build secure relationships.
- **Use family-centered, not one-size-fits-all, approaches**; tailor interventions to family strengths and needs.
- **Focus on recruiting the youngest children then retention and continuity**, especially for families facing multiple risks; longer exposure to Educare appears to support better child outcomes.
- **Screen for and respond to adversity early**; connect families to concrete supports and trauma-informed services when needed.

Classroom Characteristics and Activities

It is a rare study in the early childhood field that can annually include over 2,000 children and families and 200-300 classrooms. Because the Educare National Evaluation eventually had such numbers and because the average child attends Educare for 1.9 years, its design allowed for analyses at the classroom level, specifically, studies of peer composition and peer effects, and

racial/ethnic composition and racial match of children and teaching staff. In these studies, and in studies of continuity of care, language practices, and responsive caregiving routines, Educare classroom characteristics and everyday interactions were shown to matter for children's development, but not always in the ways traditional quality indicators would predict.

One area of inquiry was the role of peer composition and peer effects. Choi, Castle, Burchinal, Horm, Guss, and Bingham (2018) found that preschool children with few behavioral problems in classrooms where peers had higher teacher-reported behavioral problems tended to show increases in their own behavioral problems by the end of the year, whereas children in classrooms with peers who had stronger self-regulation showed greater gains in self-regulation. These effects were especially evident for children who already had relatively higher levels of self-regulation at the start of the year. Foster, Burchinal and Yazejian (2020) similarly found that children's language and behavioral outcomes were more closely associated with peer skills than with classroom age composition itself; mixed-age grouping did not predict outcomes once peer skills were considered. These two studies suggest that the developmental influence of classroom composition is less about age structure *per se* and more about the skills and behaviors children are exposed to in daily peer interactions.

A second area of research examined school racial/ethnic composition and racial match. Soliday Hong, Legette, Kuhn, Zgourou, Kainz, Yazejian et al. (2023) examined Black children in 20 Educare schools and found that Black-majority schools were associated with teacher belief differences, but not with differences in classroom instructional support or child language outcomes in comparison to Black children attending non-majority-Black schools. In addition, within Black-majority preschools, behavioral concerns were lower when the assistant teacher was a racial match with the child, and child initiative was higher when both lead and assistant teachers were racial matches. Iruka, Kainz, Kuhn, Guss, Tokarz, Yazejian et al. (2023) likewise found that although traditional classroom quality ratings did not differ by school racial/ethnic composition, children's language and social-emotional outcomes did vary, as did family risk patterns. These findings indicated that racial composition matters, but its effects may be indirect, context-dependent, and intertwined with structural inequities and culturally responsive pedagogy rather than captured fully by conventional quality measures such as the ECERS-3 (Harms et al., 2014) and the CLASS-Pre-K (Pianta et al., 2008). [A note on global quality: This is not to say that one should not use these measures for quality improvement, but because most Educare classrooms traditionally scored at the higher end of these scales, there was little variability.]

Horm, File, Bryant, Burchinal, Raikes, Forestieri et al. (2017) contributed an important cautionary note through study of continuity of care in infant-toddler classrooms. Their findings showed that continuity of care was associated with stronger teacher ratings of self-control, initiative, and attachment, and with fewer behavioral concerns during the infant-toddler period. However, continuity of care was not related to later vocabulary or social skills after children transitioned to preschool, and the study did not provide clear support for widespread recommendations for continuity of care as a universal practice. At the same time, the authors found that the association between continuity of care and child outcomes was stronger in higher-quality infant-toddler classrooms, suggesting that continuity may matter most when it is embedded within an already supportive caregiving environment. This finding reinforces a broader theme across the Educare

literature: structural features alone are not sufficient, and their effects depend on the quality of the relational and instructional context in which they occur.

Daily caregiving routines and language practices were the focus of two studies in Educare classrooms. The Tulsa LEP team (Laurin, Guss, and Horm, 2021) showed that during diapering, caregiver responsiveness was associated with both infant/toddler involvement and well-being, while caregiver encouragement was associated with well-being specifically. This suggests that routine care moments are not merely logistical tasks but meaningful relational opportunities that support children's emotional security and engagement. The Lincoln LEP and several other LEPs (Raikes, White, Green, Burchinal, Kainz, Horm et al., 2019) investigated the language gains of dual language learners (DLLs) in classrooms where teachers used (a) English and little or no Spanish, (b) English with some Spanish, or (c) both English and Spanish. They found that DLLs made gains in both English and Spanish across classroom language contexts, but children in classrooms using both English and Spanish showed stronger Spanish auditory comprehension. This indicates that home-language support can add value for children's bilingual development without undermining English language growth.

Overall, these studies suggest that effective early childhood practice depends on intentional attention to peer ecology, culturally responsive staffing and pedagogy, responsive caregiving in routines, and language practices that honor children's home experiences.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- **Peer composition matters, not just classroom age mix;** intentionally foster positive peer interactions and prosocial behavior to reduce the spread of behavioral problems.
- **Promote self-regulation through classroom climate;** teachers can support self-regulation by embedding explicit social-emotional instruction, modeling regulation strategies, and using consistent routines.
- **Use culturally responsive practices, especially in racially segregated settings;** programs should consider how staffing, classroom composition, and pedagogy affect Black children's experiences and outcomes.
- **Look beyond traditional quality ratings;** practitioners and administrators may want to supplement global ratings with attention to relational and cultural processes.
- **Treat routine care moments as developmental opportunities;** use these moments intentionally to build secure, responsive interactions.
- **Support home-language use for multilingual learners;** value and support children's home language rather than discouraging it.
- **Invest in teacher training and coaching;** staff need preparation not only in instruction but also in responsive caregiving, peer facilitation, language support, and culturally responsive practice.
- **Align classroom practice with children's social and cultural contexts;** effective early childhood environments are not only structurally high-quality, they are also relationally rich, linguistically supportive, and attentive to children's lived experiences.

Teacher Turnover

To care for and nourish infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with the supportive classroom practices noted in the section above, a stable workforce is essential, but even in a high-quality program such as Educare annual teaching staff turnover has been about 30%, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Three Educare studies, summarized below, investigated this challenging issue, showing that teacher turnover is common, patterned, and consequential; associated with a mix of teacher characteristics, workplace conditions, and classroom composition; and tends to be highest early in employment. The newest study also suggests that turnover can affect children's developmental gains, especially in social-emotional development, with the strongest effects for infants and toddlers.

Bryant, Yazejian, Jang, Kuhn, Hirschstein, Soliday Hong et al. (2023) found that turnover risk was highest during the first 2 to 3 years of employment and was associated with both individual and contextual factors, including years of experience, educational attainment, perceived work environment, classroom type, and depressive symptoms. Kwon, Jang, Ford, Horm, Yazejian, and Bryant (2025) similarly reported substantial annual turnover rates in Educare, ranging from 18% to 41% over 16 years (2007-2024), and identified higher turnover risk among teachers with more education, fewer years of experience, a higher number of depressive symptoms, and in classrooms serving more dual language learners (DLLs) and more children with health issues. In contrast, stronger job resources and greater intrinsic rewards were associated with lower turnover risk. These two studies suggest that turnover is shaped by a combination of workforce characteristics, classroom demands, and organizational conditions rather than by any single factor alone.

A more recent study by Kwon, Jang, Ford, Horm, and Yazejian (2026) extended this literature by examining the consequences of within-year teacher turnover for children's outcomes. The authors found that turnover in lead or co-lead teachers was associated with smaller gains in social-emotional competence among infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, with the strongest associations observed for infants and toddlers. However, turnover was not associated with increased behavioral problems among preschoolers, nor was it related to preschoolers' language gains. The study also found that greater program dosage moderated the negative association between turnover and social-emotional gains for infants and toddlers, whereas parent-child relationships did not buffer. The evidence from these three studies of staff turnover indicates that teacher turnover may undermine continuity of care in ways that are especially consequential for the youngest children's social-emotional development.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- School leaders should strengthen onboarding and the support of staff during their **first 1–3 years** of employment.
- Improve **job resources**, supervision, and recognition; and be alert to depressive symptoms, as part of retention efforts.
- Pay special attention to **infant-toddler classrooms**, where turnover appears especially harmful.
- **Policymakers can help** school leaders by recognizing that retaining ECE staff requires better policies addressing compensation, workload, staffing ratios, and mental health resources.
- **Future studies should test which retention strategies actually reduce turnover and** whether turnover affects other child outcomes beyond social-emotional development.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In 2022, the Educare Network adopted a new research agenda focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion and asked the Educare Research, Evaluation and Data Strategies committee (EREDS) to include these issues in the National Evaluation protocol. EREDS commissioned an existing committee on measurement to address these issues over a 3-year period. The newly named Committee on Assessment of Race, Equity, and Socialization (CARES), comprised of 5 program staff, 5 LEPs and team members from FPG and Start Early, revised the parent and staff surveys to include measures of perceived discrimination and ethnic-racial socialization beliefs and behaviors. The CARES committee shared data from these new measures in 4 internal data memos, 2 all-Educare webinars, and a data dialogue at the 2024 annual meeting (results not yet published). Over this same period, the FPG team and LEPs conducted and published three qualitative studies of practices related to equity and an interesting study relating historical racism to contemporary discrimination to children's outcomes.

Four central themes emerged. First, discrimination is present in everyday life and within Educare settings, but reported levels are generally low to moderate and vary widely across individuals and schools. Second, Educare and other similar high-quality programs may buffer the observable effects of historical racism and current structural inequities on children's development. Third, Educare staff and parents are increasingly engaged in ethnic-racial socialization, but these practices remain limited and differ by role and racial/ethnic group. Finally, qualitative studies showed that Educare educators and evaluators have a commitment to equitable teaching and research practices and have made progress in some areas, but there is still substantial room to deepen practice and strengthen support for families and staff. Main findings are summarized below.

Staff and parent experiences of discrimination. Staff reports showed that many Educare employees experience unfair treatment in daily life, and some also experience it at work. Overall discrimination scores were relatively low, but some schools and individuals reported much higher levels. Discrimination was experienced differently across groups: Asian, American Indian, and Black staff most often cited race as a cause for discrimination, Hispanic/Latina staff cited ethnic origin, and White staff more often cited gender, age, or appearance. At Educare schools, discrimination levels were generally low, but some staff linked unfair treatment to their job role or education level, and infant-toddler teachers reported more discrimination than pre-K staff.

Parent reports followed a similar pattern. Everyday discrimination was generally low to moderate compared to those in previous large-scale studies of similar populations, with Native American, Black, and parents of another race reporting the highest levels. These experiences were linked to worse mental health, especially among Native American parents. Parents reported very little discrimination at Educare itself, which is encouraging, though underreporting is possible. When parents did report negative interactions, they were more likely to feel teachers did not respect or support their parenting.

Discrimination and well-being. Higher everyday discrimination was associated with more negative views of the workplace among staff, and for teaching staff it was also linked to poorer self-rated health and more depression symptoms. Among parents, discrimination was associated with worse depression screening scores, especially for Native American parents. These findings show that discrimination is not only an interpersonal issue but also a workplace and health issue.

Discrimination and children's outcomes. Focused on the outcomes of Black children enrolled in 20 Educare schools, Vuletich, Stafford, Iruka, and Payne (2024) examined how historical and contemporary inequities may relate to children's language and socio-emotional development. Historical racism was operationalized as the proportion of enslaved individuals living in an area in 1860 and current structural inequalities included economic mobility, racial disparities in poverty, and residential segregation. Although significant correlations were observed among the variables and children's outcomes, the associations were no longer significant after accounting for the nesting of children within settings and for children's prior skills. Additional research is needed in this area, but the findings suggest that when children are served in more optimal environments like Educare, negative structural factors may not be as detrimental. That is, Educare may buffer or reduce the observable effects of historical and contemporary inequities on children's development.

Ethnic-racial socialization: beliefs, behaviors, and confidence. Staff generally supported the importance of helping children learn about race, ethnicity, culture, and discrimination, and their confidence in doing so was generally strong. Nonetheless, reported classroom practices were still limited. Teaching staff increased these activities over the 3 years, but overall frequency remained low. The most common activities reported were reading books with diverse characters and talking about differences in appearances. Less common activities included conversations with parents or explicit teaching about family history and cultural traditions. Mentor teachers and family engagement staff strongly valued ethnic-racial socialization, yet this did not always translate into a greater number of classroom activities.

Parents also reported low frequencies of cultural socialization activities overall, though Black and Native American parents reported more than others. Parents who experienced more discrimination were more likely to engage in cultural socialization practices, suggesting bias may motivate parents to prepare children for racial realities. Parents generally thought these conversations should begin around late toddlerhood, while staff often thought they should begin in infancy or toddlerhood.

In summary, the survey results suggest Educare staff have a foundation of willingness to engage with topics of discrimination and cultural differences and self-efficacy, yet may need more coaching and practice to turn confidence into more frequent action. School climate also matters. Staff who reported less discrimination rated their work environment more positively, and parents' sense of respect depended on positive interactions with staff. This suggests equity work is not only about addressing overt bias, but is also about building everyday relational practices that make staff and families feel valued.

Equitable teaching and research practices. Educare researchers have published three recent studies about practices related to race and equity, one with teachers, mentor teachers, and family engagement staff and two with local evaluation partners and program staff. Crawford, DeMarco, Wongwai, Iruka, Soliday Hong, Kuhn et al. (2026) reported that 191 educators across 25 Educare schools expressed a wide range of beliefs, comfort levels, and practices related to talking about race and cultural heritage with young children. Although many respondents affirmed the importance of early, developmentally appropriate conversations, others felt such discussions were inappropriate or potentially harmful. Some educators believed children were too young to understand race, while others emphasized that even toddlers show awareness of racial differences and benefit from culturally affirming environments.

The study also revealed substantial practical and structural barriers. Several respondents complained about policies prohibiting holiday celebrations, revealing that many educators were unsure how else to introduce cultural traditions or heritage. Educators also described uncertainty about how to partner with families, with some feeling teachers should defer to parents on sensitive topics and others noting that family beliefs can introduce bias or conflict with classroom goals. At each school, there were respondents who expressed a desire for more professional development, clearer guidance, and better materials to support racially responsive practice. This study's findings showed that even within Educare, educators hold divergent views and have inconsistent perceptions within school communities of the expectations around racial and cultural socialization.

A mixed methods study by De Marco, Iruka, Ho, Yazejian, Price, Z., Kuhn and LEP colleagues (2024) described an effort within the Educare Network to embed anti-racism into early childhood research and evaluation through the LEP community of practice. Baseline surveys were completed by 57 participants (LEPs and staff) and 31 completed follow-up surveys after an 18-month anti-racism community of practice that intended to make race and racism more visible and improve knowledge and practices related to equitable research. Activities included workshops, readings, site reports, and shared reflection.

Quantitative results showed no significant change in reported knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs about anti-racism research, likely because baseline scores were already high. The reported use of anti-bias and culturally responsive practices significantly increased. Qualitative responses suggested that participants shifted toward more participatory, qualitative, and community-driven approaches, while also recognizing persistent barriers such as limited time, staffing, funding, institutional resistance, and oppositional political climates. These findings suggest that sustained collaborative learning can strengthen equitable research practices even when changes in beliefs are harder to detect.

Another article led by De Marco (De Marco, Gabas, Baird, Buck, Johnson, and Napoli et al., 2026) shared two case studies involving Educare schools to highlight data walks as an equitable data dissemination method. The collaborative learning around equitable practices conducted through the Network's evaluation community of practice was thus communicated to the broader field to multiply the impact of the work.

Implications for early childhood program practice:

- **Invest in sustained professional learning;** one-off trainings are not enough; programs need ongoing communities of practice, coaching, and reflection time.
- **Provide clear leadership guidance about expectations and school values;** reduce role-based inequities among staff.
- **Provide staff coaching and materials to support ethnic-racial socialization** and have school-wide dialogues to address misconceptions about children's developmental readiness, policies and expectations, and the availability of materials to support this work.
- **Start conversations related to race and cultural heritage with children early,** even in infancy or toddlerhood; with respectful, two-way parent-teacher communication, engage parents as partners in cultural socialization.
- **Make equity and anti-bias work part of everyday practice.**
- **Ensure that the Research-Practice Partnership centers educator voices.**
- **Treat equity work as wellness work** by connecting it to mental health supports.
- **Protect equity work from political backlash:** Institutions may need guidance and safeguards so staff can do anti-racism work without fear of retaliation or compliance risk.
- **Measure practice change, not just attitudes:** Evaluation should track whether anti-bias practices are actually being used, since knowledge and attitude gains alone may not capture meaningful change.

Educare and Emerging Scholars

Graduate students played important roles in the National Evaluation of Educare across several schools. Many served as research assistants, collecting, organizing, and/or analyzing data, and several also used evaluation data to meet requirements of an advanced degree. The evaluation supported the completion of 6 master's theses and 11 doctoral dissertations at 10 different universities. In most cases, the LEP served as the student's primary advisor, helping students develop their research skills and deepen their understanding of early childhood education.

These opportunities benefited not only the students but also the participating schools and the broader field of early childhood education. By allowing graduate students to collect data in their programs, schools contributed to the preparation of researchers who understand the realities, strengths, and challenges of early childhood settings. Graduate students gained practical experience conducting research in authentic educational environments, working collaboratively with teachers and administrators, interpreting data, and connecting research findings to program improvement. Their involvement also created opportunities for schools to engage with emerging scholars and to contribute directly to the development of knowledge about effective early childhood practices.

In this way, Educare served an important purpose beyond evaluating its own programs: it helped build the next generation of trained early childhood researchers. These scholars will continue to influence the field through their research, leadership, teaching, and advocacy, while drawing on the

knowledge and experience gained through their work with participating schools. Although we do not summarize the findings of these theses and dissertations here, they are listed after the section on published articles.

In Closing

Over the past 20 years, Educare research has played an important role in showing what data-informed, high-quality early childhood education can look like in practice. By carefully collecting and studying information from Educare programs over time, evaluators and program teams have been able to better understand what supports children’s learning, family engagement, and healthy development. That long view matters because it helps move the conversation beyond short-term outcomes and toward a deeper understanding of what it takes to create strong, consistent, and responsive early learning environments.

Just as importantly, the lessons learned from this research have likely helped Educare teams strengthen their work in meaningful ways. Data can illuminate both successes and areas for growth, giving educators and leaders the opportunity to refine practices, improve services, and better meet the needs of children and families. In that sense, evaluation is not only about measuring impact; it is also about supporting continuous learning and improvement. We believe the knowledge gained over these two decades has helped Educare programs thrive and has offered insights that can benefit the broader early childhood education field as well.

Looking ahead, it remains vital for the Educare Research Program Partnerships to continue collecting and discussing data about their children, families, and staff. Ongoing evaluation can help show whether progress is sustained, where new challenges emerge, and which strategies continue to make a difference. It can also help ensure that programs stay responsive to changing family needs, community contexts, and educational realities. With continued study, Educare can keep building on its strong foundation, contributing both to its own growth but also to a stronger, more informed early childhood education field overall.

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