

Great kindergarten teaching pays off later

By Jim Nowlan

A study reported recently in the New York Times finds that excellent kindergarten teachers add as much as \$320,000 to the lifetime earnings of a class of 5-year-olds versus that of those taught by so-so teachers. Conducted by respected economists, the study may refocus attention on the value of good teaching, and of how to reward the great ones and phase out those who don't measure up.

The study also reveals that students who learned more in kindergarten were also more likely to go on to college and less likely to become single parents.

The study followed 12,000 students in Tennessee from kindergarten to age 27 and controlled for socioeconomic differences across kindergarten classes, which were minimal anyway.

For an old bachelor like me, the thought of spending each day with 20-30 little coiled springs of energy is terrifying. Yet the best in the profession love their work, and it pays off for their pupils later. I tracked down a couple of highly regarded kindergarten teachers to find out how they excel. They were not surprised that their work pays off later in adult life.

"We're setting the groundwork for lifelong education," observes Vickie Peterson, a 35-year veteran of early childhood education now at Longfellow Elementary in Rock Island.

“I’m planting the seeds for openness to learning,” says Deborah Adams of Aroma Park Elementary in Kankakee.

“I provide a nurturing environment in which my children feel safe, cared about,” says Vickie Peterson. “We have lots of hands on activities, such as stamping out letters for CAT from playdoh with a cookie cutter.”

Similarly, Adams notes the importance of a “safe, comfortable” environment in which she can create high expectations for her pupils.

“We also have a lot of kinesthetic activities,” adds Peterson. “We get up and move around, singing and clapping. Our classroom is a noisy place.”

“We meld creative play and education,” says Adams, who has been teaching 18 years. “I am enthusiastic, curious and have a child-like attitude of wonder about the world around us.”

“A love of learning is key and you have to be excited about it,” notes Peterson. “We share success; we celebrate as a class when one of the classmates has learned something. We send ‘Good News’ notes home for parents, to proclaim that a child has learned, for example, to count to 30.”

Indeed, working with families in “partnerships” has become another critical element in the learning process.

“Parents earlier didn’t know what to do with their children,” says Peterson, “but now we tell parents what we’re doing in the classroom.” Peterson has monthly meeting with her families and provides them “Home Connection” ideas and activities that complement what is going on in the classroom.

The study, which was led by Harvard economist Raj Chetty, found that class size also made a positive difference in the later outcomes of kindergarteners.

“I definitely believe in the benefits of smaller classes,” declares Adams. “Five-year-olds are very needy of attention.”

“They all want to work with me in small groups,” adds Peterson. “It’s great to have 20 students in four small groups.” But with 25-30 children, a teacher’s attention for each child is spread thin. Unfortunately, neither Adams nor Peterson has the luxury of small classes, instead working with 25-30 each.

Peterson teaches on a modified year-round schedule, which means she has been teaching since early August. The schedule breaks the year into quarters with two-week breaks between teaching blocks and a shorter summer vacation. Peterson likes this schedule, as she feels students retain their learning better.

“In my 18 years of teaching,” observes Adams, “the expectations for learning have gone up tremendously.” By the end of a year, her students can read 100 sight words and are “beginning readers,” achievements that used to be fine for end-of-year first-graders.

The youngsters also can write independently and identify sets of numbers and do simple addition, according to Peterson.

Possibly most important, the kindergarten students learn social skills such as keeping their eyes on the speaker, sharing, using “thank you” and “please,” techniques they may not learn at home.

I am reassured to find that excellent teaching apparently makes a life-long difference. In this day when education budgets are being squeezed by rising public

health care costs and the recession, we need to put high priorities on rewarding the best teachers and on providing small classes.