
Utah Early Intervention Project Report

Classification Status of Children Once Enrolled in Early Intervention Programs

**Report submitted to the
Utah State Office of Education**

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Summary

The Utah Early Intervention Project (UTEIP) longitudinally followed a group of children, who were once enrolled in early intervention programs, from 1999/2000 through the 2003/2004 academic year. Information on children's special education classification status was obtained. The purpose of this report is to examine the status of these children in regard to classification/declassification. We found that almost half of the children in the UTEIP study who had received early intervention services were no longer receiving special education services. A set of variables were identified on which these children and families were different when they began early intervention services. Utah's rates of declassification were much higher than rates reported in the literature. These findings support the underlying philosophy of IDEA that providing early intervention services to children with disabilities would reduce the number of children needing later special education and ultimately reduce educational costs.

History of UTEIP

The Utah Early Intervention Project (UTEIP) originally began in 1996 as a 3-year longitudinal evaluation of children who received intervention services either through Baby Watch (Part C of IDEA) or through preschool special education; original funding came from both the Utah Office of Education and Department of Health. UTEIP has longitudinally followed these children and families with funds from the Utah State Office of Education from 1999/2000 through the 2003/2004 academic year.

When it began, UTEIP enrolled 150 children who were newly enrolled in Part C intervention programs and 150 children enrolled in preschool special education. Children were enrolled from a variety of identified locations in the state in order to represent the various possible service contexts (program configurations, geography, cultural variation, etc.). Extensive data were collected on child/family contextual variables, descriptions of services, costs of services, transition activities, community involvement, services received outside the prescribed programs, and individualized plans for services/education. Outcome data collected included child development, family impacts, and parent satisfaction. A detailed report from this phase of the project describes the areas examined and outcomes (Innocenti, Roberts, Goetze, Taylor, Judd, & Pindiprolu, 1999). A summary report of the outcomes from this study is also available in the Utah Special Educator (Innocenti, 2004).

Classification as an Outcome

How do we know early intervention is effective? Changes in developmental skills have been a

common way of examining effectiveness and the research literature is well documented (Casto & Mastropieri, 1986; Guralnick, 1997). It is safe to say that the general efficacy of early intervention has been demonstrated in the research literature, although questions still remain. Another approach to examining effectiveness is to look at who stays in special education and who gets out of special education (“graduates” or is declassified). In this report we will look at this issue of who stays and who leaves, and at whether any information from the child’s early intervention years helps us predict who stays and who leaves. As a clarification, I use the term early intervention to mean services provided to children and families under an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and/or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) prior to children’s kindergarten entry.

The issue of graduation from special education is an important issue. In 1986, advocates for a preschool/early intervention component to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, then PL 94-142) argued that providing early intervention services to children with disabilities would reduce the number of children needing later special education and ultimately reduce educational costs (discussed in Goetze and Price, 2000). This argument helped sway lawmakers and make early intervention a reality. Despite this philosophy literally changing the field of early intervention, very few studies in the literature have sought to define success by looking at the declassification of children over time.

Carlson and Parshall (1996) analyzed data collected over a period of five years in the first half of the 1990s from the state of Michigan. Results indicated that from the years of 1989-1993, 7% of all students with disabilities between the ages of 6 to 26 ($n = 51,624$) were declassified from special education services. This study did not specifically identify which children had received early intervention. Goetze and Price (2000) provide one of the few longitudinal studies that directly addressed the declassification issue. Of a multi-state sample of 323 youths who received early intervention services, 72.1% were classified with a disability at 6 and 10 years, 5.3% were classified at 6 years but not at 10 years, 5.9% were not classified at 6 years but were at 10 years, and 16.7% were no longer classified at 6 or 10 years.

Although these studies provide some indication of what levels of declassification might be expected (range from 7% to 17%) they leave questions. The Carlson and Parshall (1996) findings do not directly address declassification from early intervention and a declassification rate of 7% might be considered not practically significant from a policy perspective. The findings from Goetze and Price (2000) suggest that some children are declassified only to be reclassified as eligible for special education. The consistent rate of 17% declassification is much higher than in the Carlson and Parshall study and would suggest practical significance from a policy perspective. However, the issue of children moving in and out of special education raises some concern about costs to the school district, the best placement for students, and impacts to the family. These concerns need to be examined in longitudinal research.

If children in the Utah study are declassified at a rate similar to or higher than that found by Goetze and Price (2000), it would seem reasonable to state that Utah’s early intervention program is effective in meeting the original intent of IDEA in practically reducing the number of children needing special education and reducing overall educational costs. In this report we will examine the classification patterns of children for the academic years 2001/2002 through

2003/2004, when follow-up funding ended. We will also examine whether any information from the child's early intervention years help us predict who stays and who leaves. Predictive information may be useful to intervention programs to better individualize services.

Report Objectives

Using data collected by the UTEIP study on children who were once enrolled in early intervention services:

1. Identify children who are no longer receiving special education services.
2. Using data collected while children were in early intervention, compare information between those who remain in special education with those who have been declassified.

Analysis

Data from the UTEIP study for the academic years 2001/2002 through 2003/2004 were examined for the current analysis. Longitudinal information was obtained through a phone contact with each child's parent. A questionnaire was used to obtain school and services information. For those children who remained in special education, their teachers were contacted and more detailed educational information was obtained. Of the original sample of 300 children, 198 were contacted in 2001/2002 (73% of the original sample, 73% of the preschool special education children and 59% of the Baby Watch children), 181 were contacted in 2002/2003 (60% of the full sample, 66% and 55% of the two respective programs), and 135 were contacted in 2003/2004 (45% of the full sample, 53% and 37% respectively). An attrition analysis was completed to see if there were differences between those we were able to contact and those we were unable to contact. We found that those we were unable to contact generally had a lower income and had more negative life events during the study's first year.

Table 1 provides descriptive information on the sample. Age and declassification from special education are presented separately for children who were enrolled in Baby Watch programs and those who were enrolled in preschool special education programs. Approximately half of the children are no longer in special education. No differences in declassification were found based on the location of early intervention services. These rates of declassification are much higher than reported in previous studies.

Table 2 contains disability classification information on the children who remain in special education by the early intervention program in which they were first enrolled. These data are available for the 2001/02 and 2002/03 years. This information was not obtained for the 2003/04 year due to changes in the purpose of the study. Only the more frequently occurring classifications are presented. The majority of children are in the communication disorder category. The high number of children in this classification category has been consistent throughout the study. The percentage in the category of developmental delay is decreasing as would be expected. The categories of intellectual disability, multiple disabilities and specific learning disability are increasing. This is probably a result of children moving from the developmental delay category into these categories. However, the small percentage of

Table 1**Description of Children Previously Enrolled in Early Intervention
for the Academic Years 2001/02 through 2003/04**

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04
<i>Grade (%)</i>			
Kindergarten	15%	0%	0%
First	20%	16%	1%
Second	22%	20%	14%
Third	33%	20%	20%
Fourth	10%	32%	21%
Fifth	0%	11%	34%
Sixth	0%	0%	11%
<i>Mean age at beginning of academic year (years)</i>			
Baby Watch	6.5	7.4	8.5
Preschool special education	8.6	9.6	10.6
<i>Percent of children declassified</i>			
Baby Watch	46%	49%	46%
Preschool special education	46%	50%	47%

Table 2**Disability Classification (in percent) of Children Previously Enrolled in
Early Intervention for the Academic Years 2001/02 and 2002/03**

	Baby Watch		Preschool special education	
	2001/02	2002/03	2001/02	2002/03
Communication disorder	20	25	25	34
Developmental delay	27	11	19	4
Intellectual disability	2	14	2	9
Specific learning disability	2	5	2	9
Multiple disabilities	2	16	2	9
Autism	8	7	9	8
Don't know	18	5	25	8

children classified with a specific learning disability is interesting. Perhaps the children who are declassified are the ones who may have been in this category without early intervention. Also of interest is the finding that more parents are aware of their child's classification. Either the school districts are getting better at being sure parents understand this information, parents become more focused on this as their children age, or the families who did not know are the ones who dropped from the study.

Given that so many children were declassified, we wanted to know if we could predict who these children would be given the information collected when these children were in early intervention programs. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine for differences on information collected when the children began early intervention services between those children still classified and those no longer classified (Table 3). Four variables were the best predictors regardless of entry program (relates to age of entry into services, Part C or Part B) or year we examine for outcomes. These variables were: the child’s scores on the Cognitive Subtest of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI), the child’s total score on the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale, a parent report of the child’s health, and stress scores on the Parent-Child Dysfunction Scale of the Parenting Stress Index. The findings are straightforward. Children with higher BDI scores and higher Vineland scores are more likely to be declassified. Children with poorer health are more likely to remain in special education. Families with higher stress in the area of parent-child dysfunction are more likely to remain in special education. In addition, for children who began in the preschool special education program, higher social skills (on the Social Skills Rating Scale) and parent reports of less negative life events were more predictive of children who would later be declassified. These findings highlight the need to focus on adaptive, cognitive, and social skills in the early years. Also, the findings suggest that programs need to work with parents and the health community on child health issues, and to address family functioning outcomes. These findings emphasize the need for early intervention to partner with other programs in the community to address the diverse needs of families.

Table 3

Early Intervention Entry Variables Where Statistically Significant Differences^a Occurred Between Children Later Classified or not Classified for Special Education^b

	Baby Watch	Preschool early education
Battelle Developmental Inventory – Cognitive Scale	X	X
Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale	X	X
Health	X ^c	X
Parenting Stress Index -- Parent Child Dysfunction	X ^c	X
Negative Life Events		X
Social Skills Rating Scale		X

^a Using ANOVA, all different at $p \leq .05$

^b Similar results found for all 3 years, 2001-02 through 2003/04, unless noted.

^c Similar results for 2 of the 3 years.

Implications

Half of the children who were once served by preschool special education have “graduated” out of the special education system. The specific reasons for this cannot be determined based on data available in the UTEIP project. We do not have a control group of children who did not receive services. Neither do we have any way of knowing what would have happened had some of the higher functioning children (but still early intervention eligible) not received early intervention. However, the fact remains that many children who were identified as children with disabilities and who were served early in their school career are no longer in special education programs. It is also possible that attrition served to inflate declassification findings. However, even if you assume that all the attrited children are still in special education, the declassification rate remains at 25% or better. The findings are positive. These findings clearly support the philosophy that helped early intervention become a legal reality. More research on declassification is needed but Baby Watch and preschool special education in Utah should be commended for this demonstration of success.

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