



Successful Data Collection in Early Childhood Settings During COVID-19

Lessons from Boston Universal Pre-K

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Introduction

Rigorous research in early care and education requires high-quality data, often gathered through intensive in-person fieldwork. The COVID-19 pandemic upended the ECE sector, making it much more challenging to safely and successfully collect data in ECE settings. Although the immediate crisis has passed, these disruptions continue.

In this brief, we offer 5 lessons from our experiences collecting data in community-based centers participating in Boston's Universal Pre-K (UPK) expansion between September 2019 and June 2022.

Key Findings

- 1 When possible, establish partnerships with practitioners to facilitate research in uncertain times.
- 2 Prioritize fast-turnaround work to aid partners' decision making.
- 3 Exceed COVID-19 safety policies at research sites and clearly communicate these policies.
- 4 Retain a stable data collection team to build strong relationships with ECE staff.
- 5 Communicate frequently with sites and be nimble around fieldwork visits.

Background

In 2019, researchers from [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#), [University of Michigan](#), and [MDRC](#) partnered with the [Boston Public Schools' Department of Early Childhood](#) to launch the Boston Universal Pre-K (UPK) Study. The goal of the study was to document the facilitators of and barriers to successful expansion of the city's research-based public Pre-K model in community-based organizations (CBOs). The original study design consisted of significant in-person data collection, including child assessments, classroom observations, participant observations of coaching sessions, and interviews with teachers and administrators. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all in-person data collection in Boston was prohibited, a policy that remained in place until September 2021. We pivoted our research plans and, through a combination of strong relationships, flexible scheduling, and enhanced safety measures, were ultimately able to collect some version of all planned data.

Data we collected since March 2020



209 students assessed up to two times from 36 classrooms



4 hours of video recorded in 36 classrooms across two visits



44 classrooms observed in person for curriculum fidelity



16 administrators and 16 teachers interviewed



112 teacher and 79 administrator surveys completed

The BPS district officials and administrators at the community-based ECE centers were very concerned about the spread of COVID-19 in their schools and communities. The strategies and precautions we took to collect primary data in ECE settings may be applicable to research teams collecting data in any similarly restricted environment.

Recommendations for Data Collection

1. When possible, establish partnerships with practitioners to facilitate research in uncertain times.

The UPK study is part of the Boston Early Childhood Research Practice Partnership (RPP) which includes the Boston Public Schools (BPS), University of Michigan, MDRC, and Harvard Graduate School of Education. Due to the existing RPP structure and long-standing relationships with BPS, we were able to quickly understand the changing needs of the district during the COVID-19 crisis and pivot the study plan accordingly. Prior to and during the pandemic, our team met weekly and included at least one representative from BPS. As we reintroduced in-person data collection in the CBOs, our BPS partners made us privy to rapidly

arising challenges in the CBOs. This ongoing needs assessment helped us avoid overwhelming busy Pre-K teachers and directors with research activities and communication during their most challenging weeks.

2. Prioritize fast-turnaround work to aid partners' decision making.

To be a responsive partner in the midst of a crisis, we provided fast-turnaround analysis of topics of interest to decision makers. Specifically, we wrote analytical memos on interviewees' feedback about the UPK coaching model, professional development sessions, supports for dual language learners, and supports for students with disabilities. These memos were delivered to the UPK director, coaches, and programming team to inform prompt and responsive revisions to UPK programming and support during the pandemic.

3. Exceed COVID-19 safety policies at research sites and clearly communicate these policies.

Prior to resuming our in-person data collection activities, we surveyed CBO administrators about visitor policies several times. Repeated surveys were critical as policies were dynamic, increasing in stringency as COVID cases rose. Ultimately, we adopted policies for data collection that exceeded requirements at centers. Our policies included:

- Providing the data collector's proof of vaccination to UPK sites with first contact
- Weekly PCR testing OR daily rapid testing for research staff prior to site visits
- Wearing masks and providing KN95 masks for data collectors in response to the Omicron variant

These policies helped us to retain our full sample of CBO research sites. Furthermore, to our knowledge, no one from the data collection team contracted or spread COVID at the research sites during in-person field work.

We knew from our regular communications with BPS and mid-project analysis of CBO staff interviews that

nearly all centers had adopted a no-contact procedure for families during pick-up and drop-off times. These changes made communications with families harder for teachers and directors. We also learned that UPK families were more hesitant than those in similar, pre-pandemic studies to participate due to the risk of additional COVID exposure.

In response to the communication challenges facing CBO staff and COVID concerns from UPK family, we sent the CBOs brief letters for parents (paper and email versions) that clearly explained the data collection team's COVID-19 safety precautions to preface the IRB consent form packet. By the end of fall data collection, our consented pool of four-year-olds enrolled in UPK rose from 27 to 215 students.

4. Retain a stable data collection team to build strong relationships with ECE staff.

Our research coordinators and research assistants were the same for each stage of data collection. This consistency established rapport which proved invaluable as schedule changes and center closures continued throughout the data collection period. As a result, teachers and directors eased visitor policies and happily accommodated visits on short notice or at odd times to follow up with difficult-to-reach students whose attendance was further complicated by COVID-19 exposure to siblings and family members.

5. Communicate frequently with sites and be nimble around fieldwork site visits.

Roughly one in five assessment visits in fall 2021 and spring 2022 were canceled or otherwise modified, primarily due to COVID-related closures and absences. Expecting this from our interviews with staff, we scheduled all visits at least a week in advance and checked in several times prior to remind staff of our planned visits. We also made sure assessors were in communication with several CBOs at all times so they could visit another familiar site in the case of any last-minute cancellations.

Across school year 2021-22, we conducted 387 assessments on a sample of 209 UPK students. Of those, the completion of about one in seven assessments depended on replacement visits for cancellations, rescheduled visits, and flexible RA

staffing. These rates of cancellation and adjustment are much higher than we experienced in fieldwork prior to the pandemic. Close communication with staff was essential for successful field work in the crisis.



BOSTON EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP

The Boston Early Childhood Research Practice Partnership team conducts research and strives to answer critical policy and programmatic questions about early childhood education in the Boston area and beyond. Learn more at <https://edpolicy.umich.edu/boston-research-practice-partnership>

