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ABSTRACT

Although kindergarten entry is delayed for a significant number of children each year, many aspects of this practice have not been investigated. This study examined reasons mothers chose to delay their child's kindergarten entry and the decision-making process related to this choice. Participating in this qualitative interview study were 15 mothers who chose to delay their children's kindergarten entry for the 1996-1997 school year, despite their child being eligible for kindergarten entry. Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using computer software specifically designed for qualitative data analyses. Findings revealed that mothers clearly fell into two groups, distinguished primarily by factors upon which they based their decision and the timing of the decision. Mothers in the PV group based their decision on factors associated with their own experiences and philosophies, many first considering delay at their child's birth. Following their initial consideration of delaying school entry, these parents entered a confirmatory period in which they sought advice and information that confirmed their decision. Mothers in the CV group did not consider delaying their child's entry until they were confronted with a child characteristic or experience that they considered problematic or potentially problematic. CV mothers represented many occupations and educational levels. During a tentative period these mothers considered a variety of variables associated with their own experiences, their child's characteristics, and school characteristics. They communicated a strong concern about their child's future school experiences. Findings of this study will serve school psychologists in counseling parents who are considering delaying their child's kindergarten entry, designing effective and efficient strategies to reach families who are considering delaying entry, and promoting the interaction of education professionals to support the needs of these families. (Contains 21 references.) (KB)

The decision to delay school entry: Profiles of two groups of mothers and implications for school psychological practice

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this presentation and paper is to inform school psychologists of the results and implications of a recently completed study which investigated the reasons mothers choose to delay kindergarten entry and the associated process of their decision making. Each year kindergarten entry is delayed for a significant number of children. However, many aspects of this practice have not been investigated. This study analyzed in-depth qualitative interviews of 15 mothers who chose to delay their children's kindergarten entry.

Results revealed that mothers clearly fall into two groups, distinguished primarily by the factors they base the decision on and the timing of the decision. This information was used to generate two general profiles of mothers who delay kindergarten entry. Children of one group of mothers appear to be at a greater risk of experiencing future difficulties in school.

This paper offers readers the information needed to utilize the profiles with the goal of serving families who are considering delayed entry. This information will aid the school psychologist in knowledgeably counseling parents who are considering delaying entry, designing effective and efficient strategies to reach families who are considering delaying entry and promoting the interaction of education professionals to support the needs of these families.

Introduction

We have two goals for this presentation and paper. The first is to communicate the results of this study which investigated mothers' reasoning and decision making processes regarding the question of delayed kindergarten entry. Secondly, we will make a strong case for the importance of these results for school psychological practice. One point, which we would like to emphasize from the beginning is that this research has direct implications for the conference theme: Linking Support Systems for Students and Families. The mothers interviewed for this study were playing a vital role in the education of their children and will no doubt continue to put serious effort and consideration into questions about their children's education. School psychologists and educators must acknowledge this important role and strive to form partnerships with parents. Only with cooperation and mutual respect between school personnel and parents will the best decisions for individual children be made, such as the decision of whether or not to delay kindergarten entry.

Definition and persuasiveness of delayed entry

A substantial number of parents are deciding to delay their children's entry into kindergarten (Brent, May & Kundert, 1996; Cosden, Zimmer & Tuss, 1993; McArthur & Bianchi, 1993). The prevalence of this practice, also called kindergarten holding out or academic red shirting (Frick, 1986), has been identified as one of the factors responsible for the escalation of academic demands in kindergarten (Shepard & Smith, 1988). Held out children are older than children for whom kindergarten is not delayed and therefore the average age within a kindergarten class is higher. Teachers in turn respond by adjusting their expectations and instruction to a slightly older group of children. In this way the downward trend in academic expectations is fueled. Unfortunately, such increased expectations result in a higher percentage of children not able to succeed in kindergarten (Shepard & Smith). These children may be retained or placed in developmental or pre-first classes, which many experts view as equivalent to grade retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989). The practice of retaining students has been strongly criticized (Holmes, 1990).

Researchers have reported percentages of children whose kindergarten entrance was delayed to be between 5% and 16% (Brent, May & Kundert; Cosden, Zimmer & Tuss, 1993; Graue, 1993; McArthur and Bianchi, 1993). These percentages reflect only the number of children who directly experience delayed entry. They do not reflect the number of children whose school experience may be indirectly influenced by increased expectations due

to a higher number of older children in a given class, an effect of delayed entry reported by Shepard and Smith, 1988.

Other researchers have investigated aspects of delayed entry including the characteristics of delayed entrants (McArthur & Bianchi, 1993), and the relationship of age at school entry and school success (Demeis & Stearns, 1992; DiPasquale, Moule, & Flewelling, 1980; Robinson, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1986). Results of studies regarding the academic advantages of children who are “older” versus “younger” for their grade have been mixed. Some researchers argue that children who are older are more likely to be successful in school (DiPasquale, et al., 1980; Robinson, 1986). Shepard and Smith (1986) report slight differences (about 7% or 8%) in achievement but that these differences generally disappear by the time the child is in third grade. Others report no differences between the academic and social performance of children who are older or younger at school entry (Demeis & Stearns, 1992) or between school entrance age and prevalence of a learning disability, emotional disturbance or speech and language delay (May, Brogan & Knoll, 1993). Little research has been conducted about other consequences of delayed entry for the individual child including possible socio-emotional effects of being more mature and physically bigger than peer. Nor has qualitative research been conducted which investigates parents’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of delayed entry. Since many parents choose to delay their children’s entry and educators have an interest in determining for which children this intervention may be appropriate as well as in promoting the on time school entrance of children for whom it is inappropriate, it is logical to investigate this practice by asking parents to explain which factors influenced their decisions and how and why these factors were influential at different points in their decision making processes.

Two main research questions guided this study. The first concerned the factors which influenced the mothers to delay the kindergarten entry of their children. We were particularly interested in finding out whether mothers considered the characteristics of their children, their own perceptions of negative aspects of the school, their own needs such as the need to have a small child home longer, and/or their own personal experiences important when they decided to delay kindergarten entry. The second question concerned the evolution of the decision to delay and we wondered when the possibility to delay was first considered, when a tentative decision was reached and when the decision was considered final. In addition, we wanted to know what factors were influencing mothers during each of these stages. These are the questions we set out to answer. As will be discussed

below, data from the qualitative interviews answered these specific questions and more significantly revealed two distinct groups of mothers who differed in many aspects of the decision making process.

Method

Design

This study utilized a deductive design as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). Deductive designs are somewhat structured and the researcher has some idea about which parts of phenomena are not well understood, a rudimentary conceptual framework and a set of general research questions. We used a deductive multiple case design and conceptualized a framework and developed research questions at the beginning of the study. The deductive qualitative method used was designed to provide confirmatory data regarding the research questions, as well as to allow unanticipated findings be noted and developed.

Subjects

Participants for this study were selected according to criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The defining criteria for participating mothers was that they had decided to delay their children's entry into kindergarten for the 1996-97 school year, despite the child being eligible for kindergarten entry in their school district. Mothers of children whose kindergarten entry was delayed in a previous school year were not eligible for participation. Participants were recruited from the greater mid Hudson Valley area of New York State using a variety of methods including contacting nursery school teachers, posting signs in high traffic areas and through personal contact. A total of 15 mothers agreed to be interviewed.

The Interview

The conceptual framework presented provided a graphic representation of the main concepts that were to be studied and the relationship between them. Interview questions were developed to provide data relevant to the research questions. The interviews were semi-structured and all participants were asked certain questions. However participants were given ample opportunity to elaborate and add information they considered important to communicate. The interview protocol was therefore continually refined. All mothers consented to tape recording of interviews and these recordings were later transcribed.

The first author conducted all interviews at locations convenient to the mothers. Care was taken that the environment was conducive to quiet and reflective conversation by asking mothers' permission to conduct the

interview at a time when interruptions were minimal. The atmosphere of the interview was informal and if mothers had small children at home attempts were made to hire a baby-sitter to occupy these children so the interview could proceed uninterrupted.

Data Analyses

Data analyses proceeded in steps. First, tape recorded interviews were transcribed. These transcriptions were coded using ATLAS/ti (Muhr, 1993), computer software specifically designed for qualitative data analyses. A preliminary list of codes was established based on the conceptual framework (Figure 1). The code list was modified as needed. New codes were added when existing codes were not appropriate. Coding of interviews was done by marking the segments of text that were relevant to the general research questions that guided this study. Results of coding were used to develop a one page compilation of interview data for each participant called a subject summary sheet. Later analyses included comparing and contrasting subject summaries to allow themes and patterns relevant to the general research questions to emerge.

Validity / Credibility

Active steps were taken to insure that analyses and conclusions were valid and reliable or “dependable and credible” the qualitative equivalents to these terms (Lincoln & Guba (1985). Credibility refers to the “trustworthiness” of data or the extent to which the results and conclusions of a qualitative study accurately reflect the data from which they were gleaned. In this study several methods were utilized to support credibility. These included multiple case sampling, method triangulation and peer meetings. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) advice about manipulating the circumstances surrounding the collection of data to improve the quality of data collected was followed whenever possible. The person who experienced the decision making process first hand was interviewed, data were collected in an informal setting and the interviews were conducted privately. In addition, the nature of the interview was non-threatening and nonjudgmental. Mothers were told there were no correct or incorrect answers and were informed about the purpose of the study.

Insuring dependability of qualitative research is more difficult than establishing reliability. In the present study, the researcher was the sole interviewer. Analyses and emerging ideas were presented to a team of peers for feedback and evaluation. The team procedure, while used primarily to add credibility to findings, also added dependability.

A second method was utilized to insure reliability of coding. The author's research advisor read every transcribed interview and checked the appropriateness of codes and coding procedures. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Results

This study revealed that mothers who delay kindergarten entry fall into two distinct groups, distinguished primarily by the factors on which they base this decision and the timing of the decision. Mothers in one group (the PV mothers) based the decision to delay entry on factors associated with their own experiences and philosophies. Many of these mothers first considered delaying kindergarten entry at the birth of their children. Thus, their reasons for delaying entry were unrelated to the characteristics of the children. In contrast, mothers of the second group (CV mothers) did not consider delaying their children's kindergarten entry until they were confronted with a child characteristic or experience which they considered problematic or potentially problematic. The first consideration to delay for these mothers occurred quite late in the children's lives, since many of the child characteristics and experiences that concerned them were not evident at birth or at a very early age. Mothers in the first group (PV mothers) had no reason to believe that their children would have a difficult school experience. In contrast, those in the second group (CV mothers) delayed kindergarten entry because they were already sensitive to a child characteristic that they feared might adversely influence their children's school experiences.

PV Mothers

PV mothers based their decisions to delay their children's entry into kindergarten on variables associated with their own philosophies and experiences. Their decision making processes were distinctive in several ways. After the possibility to delay was first considered, two PV mothers did not experience a tentative period. These mothers considered the decision final at the birth of their children. The other PV mothers appeared to experience a confirmatory period, rather than a tentative period. During this time they had plans to delay the entry of their children and looked for evidence to support their inclination to delay. During this period PV mothers considered variables associated with their children, the school and themselves during this period.

PV mothers did not consider child or school related variables during the initial consideration but those who indicated they did not finalize their decision at the birth of the child, did consider child characteristics and variables related to their perceptions of school during the subsequent confirmatory period. Among the child

variables PV mothers discussed as relevant were their children's lack of eagerness to learn and the children's sleep schedules (that the child slept late, or still napped). School related variables mentioned as significant were related to the school environment which was perceived by two PV mothers to be harsh and unloving.

During the confirmatory period some PV mothers used advice from others to confirm their inclination to delay their children's kindergarten entry. Most PV mothers did not indicate that they asked others for advice about whether or not to delay their children's entry. Two PV mothers listened to advice from a relative and a pediatrician. How these two mothers used the advice and that the other PV mothers were not inclined to ask others for advice supports our conclusion that for PV mothers this period was a confirmatory period rather than a tentative period. These mothers tended to disregard advice which did not confirm their inclination to delay. This also appears to be true for other evidence they were confronted with which was not supportive of the decision to delay.

In sum, PV mothers initially considered the decision to delay a child's kindergarten entry very early in the child's life, sometimes even before or at the birth of the child. This initial consideration was based heavily on the mothers' personal experiences with children and the importance of a later birthdate. After the period of initial consideration PV mothers appeared to enter a confirmatory period as opposed to a tentative period. They were quite firm in their inclination to delay and appeared to seek out advice and information that confirmed this inclination.

CV Mothers

CV mothers represented many types of occupations and education levels. There did not appear to be any relationship between the occupational or professional status of the CV mothers and their decisions to delay their children. This was in contrast to the situation with PV mothers, whose professions played a large role in their initial consideration to delay their children's kindergarten entry. CV mothers were influenced to delay the kindergarten entry of their children by variables associated with the child. In contrast to the PV mothers, parent related variables played only a minor role in the initial consideration. Mothers did also not indicate that any school related variables were important at this point in the decision making process.

Child related variables which all CV mothers indicated prompted them to first consider delaying their children included the children's nursery school experience, a child characteristic or trait that was perceived to be

atypical and the child's birthdate. In contrast the PV mothers whose experiences caused them to believe school success was related to the age of the child within the child's grade and who therefore used birthdate as the primary reason to delay, CV mothers were primarily influenced by child related variables and birthdate was considered only in so much as whether the child's age was within an acceptable range in which kindergarten delay was considered feasible.

The time period following the initial consideration to delay was labeled the period of tentativeness. During this period CV mothers appeared to be actively involved in the decision making process. In contrast to PV mothers who sought evidence to confirm their inclination to delay, CV mothers considered a wide variety of factors which were child related, school related and parent related to help them finalize the decision. CV mothers' tentative period was of shorter duration than the confirmatory period of PV mothers simply because CV mothers did not initially consider delaying their children's entry until a child experience or characteristic was apparently troublesome. Frequently this was not until the child was around the age of four. In contrast, most PV mothers initially considered delaying their children's entry around the birth of the child and all before the child was three years old. Therefore PV mothers experienced a longer tentative (confirmatory) period than CV mothers.

During this stage CV mothers reported to consider many variables. Some were considered very important and others were given passing consideration. This discussion will consider those which mothers communicated were of primary importance.

While parent related variables were not found to play a pivotal role in the initial consideration of CV mothers, they did play an important role in the tentative stage of the decision to delay. Four CV mothers communicated that their experience with older children was an important consideration. In general, CV mothers' experiences with older children resulted in them believing that they understood the academic expectations of kindergarten. Unlike PV mothers whose experience with older children influenced the initial consideration because they saw their older children as benefiting from being older compared to peers, some CV mothers indicated that experience with older children gave them an understanding of high kindergarten expectations, expectations which they feared their children might not be able to meet.

In sum, this study revealed that mothers who delayed the kindergarten entry of their children fell into two distinct groups. These groups differed in the timing of the decision, the nature of the tentative period and the

variables mothers considered of primary importance during each phase of the decision making process. PV mothers based the decision to delay heavily on variables associated with their personal philosophies and experiences. These mothers tended to initially consider delaying their children's kindergarten entry very early in their children's lives. In some cases the initial consideration occurred before the birth of the child. PV mothers did not indicate that they had any specific concerns about their children's characteristics which might adversely affect these children's future school experiences. In contrast, CV mothers did not consider delaying their children's kindergarten entry until they were confronted with a child characteristic experience which they considered troublesome. During the tentative period these mothers considered a variety of variables associated with their own experiences, their children's characteristics and characteristics of the school. CV mothers communicated a strong concern about their children's future school experiences.

Implications

The results of this study have direct implications for school psychologists who may counsel parents about whether or not to delay the kindergarten entry of a particular child, advise school administrators about school entry and readiness issues, and design programs to reach parents who may be considering this option. It can no longer be assumed that parents who choose to delay kindergarten entry do so for the same reasons. The manner in which school psychologists counsel parents about delayed entry, how they advise administrators about delayed entry and the information and outreach programs they design will vary depending upon which group of parents they are attempting to reach. For example, since CV mothers, have reason to believe that their children will experience difficulties in school, schools may want to target this group and offer information about services available to the children and about the classroom environment and academic expectations of kindergarten. This study provides school psychologists with an understanding of the information needs unique to each group. By offering parents information that is appropriate and timely, school psychologists can more efficiently meet the needs of children who may experience delayed entry and support parents in their information needs.

These results underscore the need for school personnel to respect parents' desire to make good decisions regarding the education of their children. School psychologists and other educators must support families in this desire to make sound decisions. The school experiences of all children will be improved if education professionals

work in collaboration with parents who know the child best and teachers who thoroughly understand the demands of school.

Nursery school teachers can play a unique role because they have access to families who are in the midst of making the decision to delay entry. This study showed that the CV group of mothers very strongly considered the advice of nursery school teachers. These teachers can therefore be a conduit to parents who have children who may benefit from school services. Schools should offer nursery school teachers up-to-date information about delayed entry and about the kindergarten expectations and classroom environment of area elementary schools. Interactions between nursery school teachers, kindergarten teachers, school psychologists and administrators should be encouraged.

In summary, school psychologists who are knowledgeable about the results of this study can tailor their outreach, information and counseling programs to meet the requirements of families with differing needs. School districts may take advantage of the option to gear these programs more heavily toward the children of CV mothers, since these parents may need more information about the availability of services and the advantages of such services for their children. Children and their parents will be best served through collaboration between parents, teachers, administrators and school psychologists.

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