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ABSTRACT

Noting that there are special considerations to take into account when creating appropriate and effective programs for young children, this issue of Progress of Education Reform focuses on early childhood care and education. The report is intended for use by policymakers who are considering implementing and/or reforming early care and education practices in their states. Four questions are discussed in the report: (1) whether young children do better when their early childhood curriculum is aligned with curriculum in the early primary grades; (2) when children should start school; (3) whether children who are assessed regularly fare better than children who are not; and (4) whether young children fare better with teachers having bachelor-degree-level education than with teachers having less education. Each question/issue is presented with relevant research findings, implications for policy, and references. (Contains 19 references.) (KB)

Early Care and Education

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What's inside

- Does curriculum alignment matter?
- When should children start school?
- Should young children be assessed?
- Does teacher education matter?

Early Learning Shows Benefits

A growing body of research indicates that getting young children off to a good start significantly contributes to their long-term development and school success. To many people, this knowledge implies that young children should be in deliberately and carefully designed settings to support and advance all aspects of their development. Most often, these settings include preschool, prekindergarten, child care, family child care, and other early care and education programs.

The goals of most of these programs include: (1) to provide supervised environments for young children because an increasing proportion of parents are in the workforce, (2) to respond to scientific studies of brain development that show how important high-quality environments and interactions are to children's long-term development and (3) to provide children with a sound foundation for school readiness and later school success.

Because children have unique developmental needs birth to age 5, early care and education programs cannot be constructed as a simple extension of K-12 learning, however. There are special considerations to take into account when creating appropriate and effective programs for young children.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001* is a guide for policymakers who are considering implementing and/or reforming early care and education practices in their states. The following questions, addressed in this issue, should be considered when designing high-quality early care and education programs for young children:

- Do young children do better when their early childhood curriculum is aligned with curriculum in the early primary years?
- When should children start school?
- Do children who are assessed regularly fare better than children who are not?
- Do young children do better when they have teachers with bachelor-degree-level education than when they have teachers with less education?

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Curriculum Alignment

Do children do better when their early childhood curriculum is aligned with that of primary school?

Concern with the continuity of the curriculum among early childhood programs, kindergarten and the primary grades is a long-standing issue. While many reports and papers urge early childhood and local elementary school programs to facilitate children's transitions from one setting to another, the effort to do so tends to focus on noncurricular aspects of the move. Many educators, for example, believe that children moving from a preschool to an elementary school campus will experience distress due to the size of the new building, the numbers of children, the ratio of children to teachers and other aspects that aren't familiar to them.

Programs such as Head Start long have urged their grantees to establish strong partnerships with schools to ease students' transition to school and to promote continuity of the preschool program's main features. While no data are available comparing the effects of curriculum continuity versus discontinuity, a number of issues need to be considered in this area.

The Issues

Curriculum worthiness

Alignment of curriculum from preschool to kindergarten and the primary grades is assumed to make it easier for children to make the transition from one setting to another. Continuity in and of itself, however, does not matter unless the curriculum in use is a good one. To continue using a curriculum that has not been clearly shown to be appropriate may present children with more problems than changing to a new, higher-quality curriculum.

Direction of curricular influence

Another question to consider is which setting should determine the nature of the curriculum? In general, the tendency seems to be to push down the content, skills and teaching methods of the primary curriculum rather than to push up preschool practices. Exceptions to this pattern include models such as High/Scope and Montessori, both which began as approaches to preschool curricula and have contributed to curriculum practices in kindergarten and the primary grades.

Rate of student mobility

Although the mobility of U.S. families has not often been the focus of discussion among educators, it deserves consideration in discussions of curriculum continuity. A 1995 report by the U.S. Department of Education showed that about one-third of children change schools between their entrance into 1st grade and transfer to middle school. This fact suggests that continuity of curriculum, both vertically, from one age level to another, and horizontally, from one school to another, cannot be guaranteed, anyway.

Implications

Careful studies of the effects of curricular continuity and discontinuity are needed. The rapidly increasing incidence of student mobility and the complexities of curriculum change and reform make it unlikely that curriculum alignment can be achieved, unless that curriculum is narrow in focus and highly scripted. Children should be received and responded to as individuals who bring a wide range of background experiences, knowledge and abilities with them to school. Narrowing the curriculum merely to maintain continuity is unlikely to help children do better in school.

To Find Out More:

Mangione, Peter L., and Speth, Timothy (1998). "The Transition to Elementary School: A Framework for Creating Early Childhood Continuity through Home, School and Community Partnerships." *Elementary School Journal.* Summary available from ERIC at http://readyweb.crc.uiuc.edu/biblio/rdyej98.html

Marcon, R. A. (1995, May). "The Fourth-Grade Slump: The Cause and Cure." *Principal,* vol. 74, no. 5, pp. 17-20. Summary available at: http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests/ej-cite/ej502896.html

Peters, S. (2000). *Multiple Perspectives on Continuity in Early Learning and the Transition to School.* Paper presented at "Complexity, Diversity and Multiple Perspectives in Early Childhood. Tenth Annual European Early Childhood Education Research Association Conference." London: University of London.

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Early Care and Education

School Entry Age

When should children enter school?

School entrance age varies considerably across Western countries and across the United States. Since the mid-1980s, a rapidly increasing proportion of United Kingdom children enter school at age 4, enrolling in "reception classes" referred to as the "foundation stage." A similar recent shift occurred in Scandinavia, where the school entrance age was dropped from 7 to 6 years old.

The Issues

Appropriate curriculum

Apprehension among early childhood specialists over the potentially damaging effects of the "push down" of the primary curriculum into kindergarten and preschool led the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education to advocate for appropriate early childhood curriculum practices. In addition, the National Kindergarten Alliance focuses on appropriate kindergarten curriculum and assessment practices in response to increasing pressure to transform the kindergarten year into an "academic boot camp."

Alternatives to school entrance

Research shows that children who do not participate in high-quality preschool programs are likely to suffer more from a later school entrance age than their peers who do participate in quality preschool. Thus, the child's age at school entry is unlikely to predict subsequent school achievement or completion. Rather, the effects of school entrance age depend, to some extent, on what else a child might be doing rather than attending preschool or kindergarten.

Long-term effects, particularly on boys

An increasing number of studies suggest that matters such as school entrance age and the nature of the programs available to children may have different effects on males and females. In particular, early formal academic instruction tends to yield greater long-term negative effects on boys, who, for one thing, are more likely than girls to be subjected to delayed entry and other kinds of "red-shirting" (May, 1995; Brent, et al. 1996).

This recent trend in research is difficult to interpret. It is well-established that boys' neurological development is slower than that of girls until middle childhood when boys catch up (Taylor and Machida, 1994). It also has been shown that formal academic instruction is less effective with boys than girls during the early years (Marcon, 1999). These findings suggest that if the curriculum in the first year of school (e.g., kindergarten) is academic in focus, a later entrance age might benefit boys more than girls. But, because states and districts are unlikely to impose differentiated entrance ages by gender, it is important to examine carefully the nature of the curriculum and teaching methods to be adopted.

Implications

The data give no clear indication of one right answer to the question: "When should children start school?" They, however, do suggest that the program provided to children during their first years of education can have lasting effects, some more beneficial than others, depending on their nature and the sex of the child.

To Find Out More:

Brent, D., et al. (1996, April). "The Incidence of Delayed School Entry: A Twelve-Year Review." *Early Education and Development*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 121-135. Description at: http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests/ej-cite/ej520504.html

Marcon, R.A. (1999). "Differential Impact of Preschool Models on Development and Early Learning of Inner-City Children: A Three-Cohort Study." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 358-375. Description at: http://ericeece.org/pubs/reslist/models00.html

May, D., et al. (1995). "Does Delayed School Entry Reduce Later Grade Retentions and Use of Special Education Services?" *Remedial and Special Education*, vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 288-94. Description at: http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests/ej-cite/ej510039.html

Morrison, F.J.; Griffith, E.M.; and Alberts, D.M. (1997). "Nature-Nurture in the Classroom: Entrance Age, School Readiness and Learning in Children." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 254-262. Description at http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests/ej-cite/ej543395.html

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (2000). *STILL Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement.* www.Ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/position.html

Taylor, A R., and Machida, S. (1994). "The Contribution of Parent and Peer Support to Head Start Children's Early School Adjustment." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 9, pp. 387-405.

To Find Out More:

Bowman, B.T.; Donovan, M.S.; and Burns, M.S. (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press. www.nap.edu/catalog/9745

Helm, J.H.; Beneke, S.; and Steinheimer, K. (1998). *Windows on Learning: Documenting Young Children's Work.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press. http://store.tcpress.com/0807736783.shtml

Nebraska Department of Education (2000). *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland.* Lincoln, NE: www.nde.state.ne.us/ECH/PRIMARY

Shores, E.F., and Grace, C. (1998). *The Portfolio Book: A Step-by-Step Guide for Teachers.* Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, Inc. http://ez2www.com/go.php3?site=book&go=0876591942

Do children who are assessed regularly fare better than children who are not?

Answering this question presents difficulties since finding out how well children are doing in school involves assessing them. No data have been found that specifically address this question, although the literature on early childhood education and assessment argues a number of related issues. Three of these issues are discussed briefly below.

The Issues

Appropriateness of assessments

Assessment of children can serve many different purposes, including:

- Identifying atypical patterns of development that warrant closer scrutiny by educators and parents
- Determining whether children are learning the content and skills that their district and school have set as goals
- Ensuring that the education institution is accountable for its responsibilities.

One of the most prevalent forms of assessment is using standardized tests to yield information about children's development in terms of norms associated with their age. In principle, the younger the children, the poorer their test-taking skills. A related principle is that the younger the children are when assessed by norm-based standardized tests, the more likely it is that they will be incorrectly labeled.

Research also suggests that once labeled, children tend to bring their behavior into line with that label. This suggests that repeated standardized assessments could be damaging to children, both in the level of anxiety they might experience, as well as possible negative self-perceptions based on poor test performance. It is not surprising then that the type of assessment to be used is a major issue (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001).

Potential benefits of regular assessments on children

Many specialists point out that various types of assessment strategies can be used to enhance the teacher's approach to his or her students. A teacher may assess a child through observation, portfolios and documentation of a child's experiences. These approaches to assessment allow teachers, parents and children to evaluate children's progress and to adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies accordingly. Used in this way, frequent assessment could yield real benefits, although clear evidence of these potential benefits is not available yet.

Potential effects of frequent assessment on teachers

In using standardized tests for accountability purposes, teachers frequently report feeling pressured to "teach to the test." In such cases, the children may indeed appear to "do better" on the tests than their less-prepared peers. Such tests, however, are not intended to assess whether curriculum goals have been met; rather, they are designed to sample children's repertoires of knowledge and skills at a given point in time.

Implications

Educators have a variety of assessments from which to choose. Researchers assert there are three broad categories that constitute the major functions of assessment in the early years: assessment to inform instruction, assessment for diagnostic and selection purposes, and assessment for accountability and program evaluation. They note that all "assessments must be used carefully and appropriately if they are to resolve, and not create, educational problems." (Bowman, et al., 2001, p. 259). When frequent assessment is of the right kind and is used to adjust instruction, it is likely to yield benefits to the children.

To Find Out More:

Bellm, D.; Burton, A.; Shulka, R.; and Whitebook, M. (1994). *Making Work Pay in the Child Care Industry: Promising Practices for Improving Compensation.* Washington, DC: National Center for the Early Childhood Work Force. www.ccw.org/tpp/reports.html

Burchinal, M.R.; Roberts, J.E.; Riggins, R., Jr.; Zeisel, S.A.; Neebe, E.; and Bryant, D. (2000). "Relating Quality of Center-Based Child Care to Early Cognitive and Language Development Longitudinally." *Child Development*, vol. 71, no. 2, pp. 339-357.

Center for the Child Care Workforce. (1998). *Current Data on Child Care Salaries and Benefits in the United States.* Washington, DC: CCCW. Link to order form, purchase price $10: www.ccw.org/tpp/studies.html

Edwards, C.; Gandini, L.; and Forman, G. (1998). *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections.* Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing. Link to order form, description and table of contents: http://info.greenwood.com/books/1567503/156750311x.html

Do young children do better when their teachers have bachelor degrees?

There currently are no carefully controlled studies comparing children's achievement and performance outcomes under equal, comparable conditions (e.g, curriculum, teaching practices, socioeconomic status, etc.), except for the teacher's educational attainment. Several large studies of the relationship between the quality of children's experiences in preschool and child care and the levels of their teachers' academic training do offer a basis for addressing the question.

The Issues

Staff qualifications and income level of the school population

Research indicates that overall quality of care and children's language skills are better when the caregivers are better educated. Most of the caregivers evaluated in these studies, however, did not typically have a bachelor's degree. And, in early care and education, the level of teachers' academic qualifications tends to be linked to the income level of the families they serve.

Research also shows that teachers' specific training in child development is related to the quality of care they provide. A 1998 study by A.S. Honig found that early childhood education and child development coursework accounted for more than 62% of the variance in teacher behavior in urban child care centers. Although the study reported no formal child outcomes, a reasonable inference from its findings is that the children whose teachers are trained in early childhood have better results than their peers whose teachers are not as well-trained.

Staff turnover rates

According to a 1994 report by the National Center for the Early Childhood Workforce, the single most important determinant of child care quality is the presence of consistent, sensitive, well-trained and well-compensated caregivers. High job turnover in the field, however, fueled by poor compensation and few opportunities for advancement, is causing the quality of services that children and parents receive to decline dangerously.

Inevitably, the child care and preschool staff turnover rate and its attendant low level of qualifications are related to the very low level of wages earned. Low wages are unlikely to attract persons with degrees or to make degree attainment a condition of employment. Many for-profit and nonprofit preschool programs encourage teachers and caregivers to enhance their professional expertise by participating in conferences and formal training programs to accumulate credits or to achieve associate arts degrees or child development associate qualifications. Recent informal reports, however, indicate that once these qualifications are obtained, staff members tend to seek employment outside the field of early care and education.

Inservice training

Recent reports of the pre-primary practices of the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia suggest that specific inservice teacher education improves the outcomes of preschool programs. The teachers in these pre-primary schools have only high school diplomas. But they participate in extensive weekly and monthly inservice training sessions. In addition, their continuous professional development is supported by frequent visits of pedagogical advisors (*pedagogista*) who assume major responsibility for development of the schools' entire teaching staff.

Similarly, the long-standing tradition of intense and careful inservice training provided to teachers implementing the High/Scope curriculum may help to account for its exceptional record of positive long-term outcomes for the children served by that program.

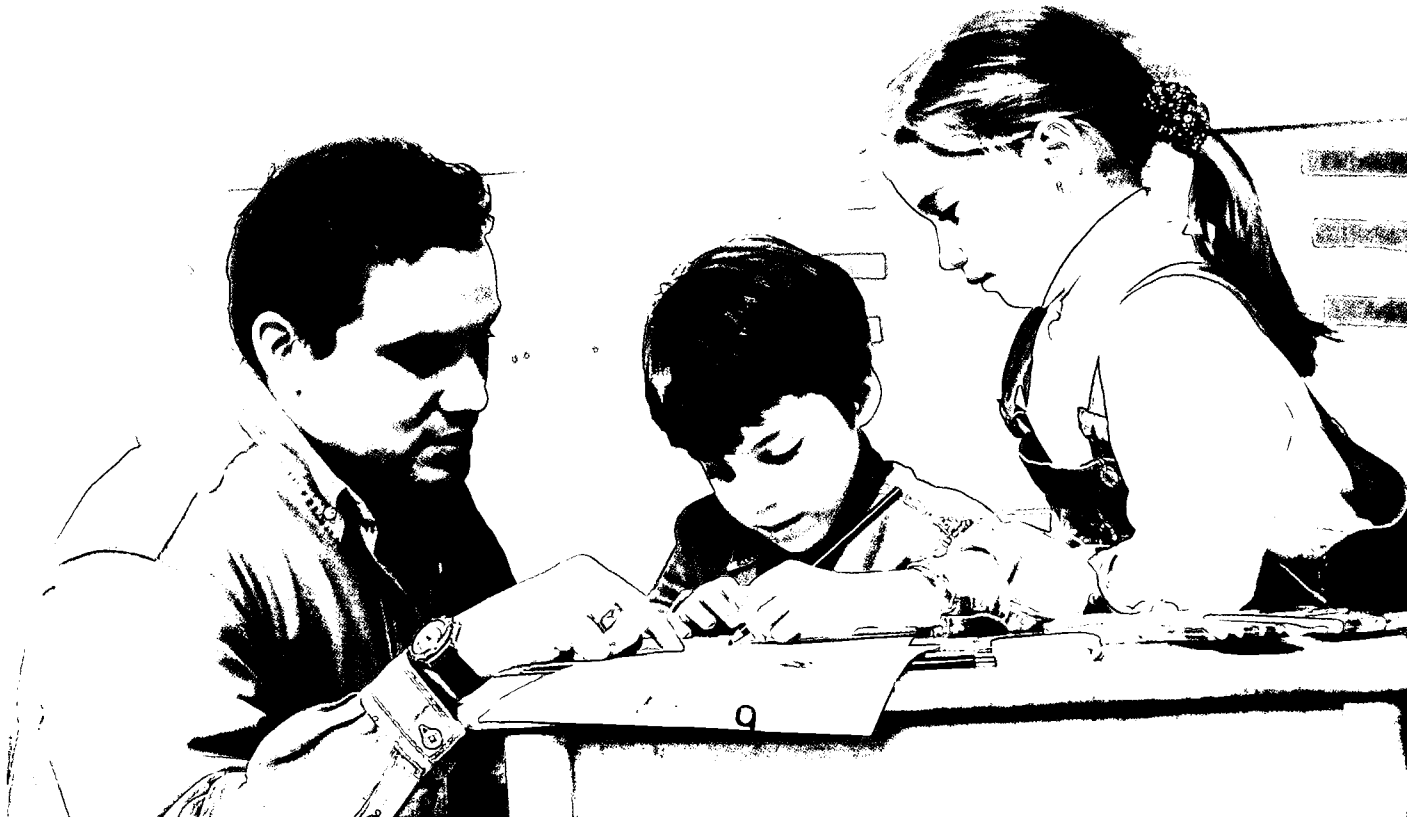
Implications

Available information makes it impossible to claim that a teacher with a bachelor's degree guarantees better outcomes for children in early childhood programs. There is ample support, however, for the notion that the higher levels of academic qualifications of early childhood teachers yield significant improvements in program effectiveness for all children, especially those from low-income families. Without substantial increases in wages and salaries, though, the preschool field is unlikely to attract large numbers of teachers with bachelor degrees.

To Find Out More:

Epstein, A. (1993). *Training for Quality: Improving Early Childhood Programs through Systematic Inservice Training.* Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. No. 9. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Foundation. Order at: www.highscope.org/CATALOG/research.htm

Honig, A.S., and Hirallal, A. (1998). "Which Counts More for Excellence in Childcare Staff – Years in Service, Education Level or ECE Coursework?" *Early Child Development and Care,* vol.V, no. 145, pp. 31-46. Description at: http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests/ed-cite/ed421211.html



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