All day Kindergarten programs and their Anticipated Benefit to Early Literacy Development - Real or Imagined

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Abstract

There has been increasing interest in both Canada and the United States in implementing all-day Kindergarten programs. Education policy makers stress the need for countries to take initiative in educating children so they are more successful once they begin their formal schooling process. But is a longer school day the only solution to the problem of why some children struggle once they enter the school system, or are there other factors that can affect children's ability to successfully navigate learning how to read, write, and do mathematical calculations? The intent of many all-day programs is to socialize the child into the world of academia. As a result, many of the programs are focused on students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds that need a *Head Start* in learning how to learn. This paper discusses some of the problems with just lengthening the school day and provides recommendations for what constitutes an effective preschool program.

Introduction

In the past decade there has been a shift in the focus of policy makers, from school-based programs to preschool-based programs in an attempt to better prepare children to succeed in school (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). This shift has resulted in more attention being paid to early literacy programs and the benefits that such programs can have on the literacy development of young children. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) say that "early literacy plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates, and enhanced productivity in adult life" (p. 1). The authors further state that "the more limited a [preschool] child's experiences with language and literacy the more likely he or she will have difficulty learning to read" (p.1).

The importance of providing quality preschool programs as a foundation for lifelong learning (Crowther, 2005; Pascal, 2009) is further emphasized by the research that shows children learn more in the first five years of their life than they do at any other time (Crowther, 2005; Essa & Young, 2003). Pascal (2009), quoting the Canadian Council on Learning, said "research indicates that the experiences during the first five years of a child's life have a major bearing on his or her future success in school, in the workplace, and many other aspects of a healthy fulfilling life" (p. 10). Shanahan (2008), reported that "learning achieved during these early years is likely to be sustained through-out the primary-school years and is an important basis for successful performance in school" (p. viii). Providing a rich learning environment in preschool is especially important for children who are "from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds" (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010).

Preschool programs begin at any time between birth and kindergarten. Preschool, in this paper, refers to any "formal program in which young children participate before they enter primary school that is designed to promote children's social-emotional, academic, language and literacy skills, health, and well-being" (Mashburn, 2008, p. 5). Preschool programs "usually include specific activities to enhance socialization, cognitive skills, or overall development of young children" (Essa & Young, 2003, p. 11). Essa and Young (2003), go on to say that these types of programs provide experiences that children might not receive at home such as participating in group activities, interaction with peers, and learning specific concepts from trained teachers.

Evidence that supports the benefits of high-quality preschool on children's readiness for school has lead to a rapid increase in the number of preschool programs available (Mashburn, 2008). Typically state-sponsored preschool programs, like *Head Start*, have only been available to disadvantaged children but more states are now looking at funding universal preschool programs for all children (Mashburn, 2008). The push for universal preschools is driven by the interest in how preschool programs can help reduce academic achievement gaps (Gerde & Powell, 2009, MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). According to Mashburn (2008), early interventions can potentially improve the well-being of children, families, communities, and societies. There has been widespread increase in publicly funded preschool programs in the United States in an effort to meet these demands. Mashburn (2008) concluded that "the primary purpose of preschool [programs] is to provide educational and social opportunities to help children enter school ready to learn" (p. 8). Shanahan (2008), reported that "learning achieved during these early years is likely to be sustained through-out the primary-school years and is an important basis for successful performance in school" (p. viii).

The importance of providing an early childhood education has been known for over 200 years (Essa & Young, 2003), but it is only recently that it has been pushed to the fore-front of society. Essa and Young (2003), believe that this is a direct result of a changing family life that has taken child-care out of the home. Essa and Young (2003) ascribe these changes to many factors including the rising cost of living, an increase in two-income families, more single-parent families, a rise in teenage parents, greater family mobility, and a decrease in extended family support. Teale (2008) also attributes the rise in preschool programs to pressure from educators and parents who see the benefits of providing intentional instruction to three and four year olds.

These are not the only reasons that early childhood education has received more support from politicians, educators, and parents. Since it's inception in 1965, as part of the war on poverty, the publicly funded program, *Head Start*, in the United States, has demonstrated that high-quality early educational intervention can combat poverty and dysfunction (Essa & Young, 2003). *Head Start* is based on the 'whole child' model which "provides comprehensive services that include preschool education, medical, dental, and mental health care; nutrition services; and efforts to help parents foster their child's development" (Puma, Bell, Cook, & Heid, 2010). The success of *Head Start* in designing language and literacy programs for 'at risk' children has led to other programs which have attempted to duplicate their results. The success of *Head Start* programs can be attributed to the fact that they are "designed to be responsive to each child's and family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage" (Puma et al, 2010, p. i). Programs like *Head Start* have proven to have a positive impact on children's preschool experiences, in part, because of this sensitivity to the whole child (Puma et al, 2010).

In order to keep preschool programs positive, educators have to remember that these programs are not designed to "fast-track" learning for children. The majority of preschools are

designed to help foster children's development, not try to accelerate it (Essa & Young, 2003). Developmentally appropriate practices for early childhood, from birth to age five, should form the curriculum for preschools and kindergartens. These practices take into account children's development in terms of social, emotional, physical, cognitive, language, and creativity (Essa & Young, 2003). Taking into account the development of the whole child helps inform the types of learning activities that are appropriate for each child. From this information, teachers are "able to plan environments, develop activities, and set expectations that match children's needs and characteristics" (Essa & Young, 2003, p. 29). The authors also say that unfortunately some educators see preschool, and kindergarten, as places to introduce academics earlier, rather than later, in an attempt to better prepare and educate children. They also say that "for an early childhood program to meet quality criteria, it must respect the emerging abilities of young children without imposing inappropriate expectations" (Essa & Young, 2003, p. 30). Essa and Young (2003) further state that "preschoolers are eager to learn, but such eagerness can be battered down if they are frequently overwhelmed by developmentally inappropriate experiences" (p. 152). Crowther (2005) echoed these sentiments when she said, getting children ready for school "often means that children are expected to be engaged in some highly inappropriate tasks" (p. 273). She includes in the list of inappropriate tasks: colouring pictures, circling words, tracing letters, and spending large amounts of time on teacher-directed activities.

A good preschool classroom must provide appropriate learning experiences in language and literacy (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) point to the research that says "early childhood professionals have long recognized the importance of language and literacy in preparing children to succeed in school", and, that "early literacy plays a key role in enabling the kind of early learning experiences that research shows are linked with

academic achievement, reduced grade retention, higher graduation rates, and enhanced productivity in adult life" (p.1). The high correlation between early literacy instruction and school achievement cannot be overlooked when questions arise as to the benefits of preschool programs. It has been found that the more limited children's experiences with language and literacy are before beginning formal schooling, the more difficulty they are likely to have with learning to read (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

The primary goal of The Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), chaired by Timothy Shanahan (2008), was "to identify interventions, parenting activities, and instructional practices that promote the development of early literacy skills" (p. vi). One of the questions asked by the panel was: "what are the skills and abilities of young children (age birth through five years or kindergarten) that predict later reading, writing, or spelling outcomes?" The answer to this question will help inform the types of programs that are the most suitable for preschool children. This report will attempt to answer the question: Is an all-day, every-day kindergarten program the best way to foster literacy learning for preschool children?

Background Literature

Preschool Programs and Early Literacy Development

Early childhood curriculums use "literacy activities to encourage children's development in a number of different areas, identified by research, as the foundation for early literacy success: oral language, phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabet knowledge, writing, and comprehension" (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998, What Works Clearinghouse, 2009, p. 2,) Additionally, Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) say "that the key literacy predictors of reading and school success include oral language, alphabetic code, and print knowledge" (p.1).

Similarly, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) found that "an alphabetic system poses a challenge to beginning readers because the units represented graphically by letters of the alphabet are essentially meaningless and phonologically abstract" (p. 22). They go on to say that, however, once children understand that letters represent sounds, the alphabet system has many advantages; since there are only twenty-six symbols, strategies for sounding out unfamiliar words can be used to learn new words. As well, if the words are encountered frequently enough for the reader to recognize them, then reading becomes automatic.

As children grow their concepts about literacy grow with them. In the early years they learn from observation and interaction with others in their social environment. Snow et al. (1998) say that "in each situation they [children] encounter, their understanding is both increased and constrained by their existing models of written language" (p. 44). It is this mediation, between models, that help children modify their understanding as they explore language, text, and meaning. Children gradually "displace the belief that print is like pictures with the insight that written words are comprised of letters that, in turn, map to speech sounds" (p. 45).

Children learn language through experience with books and other literacy activities (Snow et al., 1998). It is through listening to stories that children begin to understand the different types of language that is used. Snow et al. (1998) go on to say that "as proficiency in the forms and functions of language grows, children also gain 'metalinguistic' skills. These involve the ability to not just use language but how to think about it, play with it, talk about it, analyze it componentially, and to make judgments about acceptable versus incorrect forms" (p. 49).

While most educators and policy makers will agree that providing children with a strong start in early literacy is crucial, there is less agreement about how this is best accomplished

(Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). One of the major concerns is making sure that the curriculum "addresses the overall cognitive development of the young child by continuing to stress the physical, social, emotional, and overall cognitive development of children and at the same time, strengthening the academic curriculum" (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006, p. 5).

One of the dilemmas facing educators, who plan preschool programs, is the question of what kinds of activities should children be exposed to in their preschools? Should preschool curriculums "provide helpful social and play experiences, or should it focus on fostering early academic skills" (Teale, 2008, p. xv)? Preschool programs, such as *Head Start,* focus on language and literacy activities: vocabulary building, letter-word identification, spelling, pre-academic skills, colour identification, and letter naming (Puma et al, 2010). Puma et al. (2010) in their study of these measures, found children who had access to the *Head Start* preschool program, outperformed the control group on all measures at the end of their preschool experiences; however, the children did not maintain their advantages once they completed first grade except in the area of vocabulary building.

In a similar study conducted in Winnipeg, Canada, Zakaluk, Straw, and Smith (2005), found that children from impoverished neighbourhoods who had been exposed to an all-day, every-day kindergarten program outperformed children who attended only half-day classes, on end of year reading achievement levels. The study found that children who attended the full-day program were "superior in recognizing words in isolation, concepts about print (the ability to understand the language pertaining to written text and directionality) as well as reading level which suggested to the researchers that the full-day option allowed students more time to gain experience with books, an important precursor of reading success" (p. 31).

Both of these programs, *Head Start* and the all-day, every-day kindergarten program in Canada, focused on the elements needed to be successful in learning how to read. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006), caution against using a curriculum that is too narrowly focused on literacy skills and overlooks the development of children's personal and academic growth. The authors further state that "the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development of young children are actually major factors that influence early literacy development" (p. 5).

Home Literacy Practices

Pascal (2009) said that children, who have engaged parents, come to school with a more positive attitude to learning. When parents are interested and active in their children's learning they can provide the teacher with valuable knowledge about their child. This knowledge will help educators support the individual learning needs of children. It is important for teachers to understand the values, beliefs, and experiences that children bring to the classroom. By involving parents, educators can bridge children's prior and current experiences. Zakaluk, Straw, and Smith (2005) found that "the success of the school program is, in part, dependent upon the home literacy environment. Without sustained parental support, learning gains may dissipate as children proceed upward through the grades" (p. xii).

A rich home environment is one that fosters literacy; it is one where parents understand the value of learning to read and write and pass that attitude on to their children (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Parents provide reading materials; they read to their children and they model reading behaviours themselves (Gunn et al., 1995). Children who grow up in such an environment see the value of literacy. For them learning to read is a function of their society. They observe on a daily basis print on signs, food packages, and in newspapers and magazines. They play with alphabet letters, do puzzles, and draw and write with crayons and markers.

Children who come from homes in which books and reading are valued and a part of daily life are more likely to be early readers and do well in school (Snow et al., 1998).

Leu and Kinzer (2003) and Snow et al (1998) agree that parents who read aloud to their children everyday, beginning in infancy foster literacy development. These children develop an awareness of print and become familiar with language patterns. Their imagination and interest in reading develops as they listen to their parents read books to them. When parents read to their children at home they develop important knowledge about books and reading. They learn that print goes from left to right, top to bottom, that written words are related to the spoken language, that letters are used to form words, and words are used to make sentences. They also learn how stories are structured. They learn that certain stories always have the same beginning and ending (e.g., fairy tales). Reading a variety of texts gives children the opportunity to discover the structures that make up the different genres. Developing a familiarity of story structures provides students with the knowledge of what to expect and leaves room for developing metacognitive knowledge. Developing metacognitive knowledge allows readers to "develop effective reading strategies" (Leu & Kinzer, 2003, p. 185).

Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2004), in their longitudinal study of preschool experiences, found that home learning environments where adults mediate learning, exerts more influence on school success than children's participation in early childhood programs. As well, they found that the amount of parental involvement was one factor that improved school performance across all socio-economic groups, and that children's home learning environment during the preschool years remains a strong predictor of academic achievement. The authors further recommended that it was critical to involve parents in early childhood programs.

Types of Preschool Programs

There has been a great deal of debate about which kind of preschool program is better for children (Seifert, 2004). The merits of the child-centered programs have been compared to the instructional or curriculum-centered:

> Advocates of child-centered programming favour ample time for play and self-chosen activities. They also tend to emphasize the social development of children—learning to cooperate with others, to feel self-confident, and the like. Fostering these qualities, they argue, helps to insure academic success later, when children enter elementary school. Advocates of instructional or curriculum-centered views are less concerned about general development and give more priority to learning the skills that children need for kindergarten and elementary school. They sometimes argue that academic preparedness develops children's confidence as a by product, and therefore also develops children's social skills (Seifert, 2004, p.3).

The importance of providing explicit instruction as well as providing learning opportunities in a natural setting are but two of the factors that need to be addressed when determining what type of preschool experience is the best for young children. As well, it is important to look at the types of curriculum-centered activities that have been proven, by research, to be important predictors of later school success.

Key Components of an early literacy curriculum

Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) identified three key components of a successful early literacy curriculum supported by evidence-based research. These include: 1) oral language development, which includes vocabulary and listening, 2) an understanding of the alphabetic

code, which includes phonological/phonemic awareness and knowledge of the alphabet, and 3) knowledge and understanding about print and its use.

a) Goals of a preschool classroom

1) **To foster oral language**

Fostering oral language includes listening comprehension and oral language vocabulary development. Oral language is facilitated when children have many opportunities to use language in interactions with adults and each other and when they listen and respond to stories (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). As well, children build vocabulary when they engage in activities that are cognitively and linguistically stimulating such as, describing events or discussing the story. Strickland & Riley-Ayers (2006) say:

> oral language provides children with a sense of words and sentences that builds sensitivity to the sound system so that children can acquire phonological awareness and phonics. Through their own speech children demonstrate their understanding of the meanings of words, and written material". (p.2)

The authors, also found that children who are brought up in families where parents "provide rich language and literacy support do better in school than those who do not" (p. 2).

In his report, Pascal (2009) stressed the importance of oral language as the basis for literacy, thinking, and relating in any language. As well, he highlighted the importance of oral language as a tool, for children, to use in making meaning of their environment. He argued that to facilitate oral language there has to be opportunities for children to acquire decoding skills such as phonemic awareness and letter-sound recognition as they make the connections between the spoken and written words. "Children begin to read pictures and print including labels, schedules, names, high frequency words, and patterned and simple texts" (Pascal, 2009, p. 7).

This movement from pictures to texts is an important step in the literacy development of young children. Pascal (2009) in his report said that "children who thrive in primary school are those who have strong communicative skills" (p. 8); and that "proficiency in oral language is critical to the success of literacy development" (p. 20).

Teachers can promote oral language development by introducing new vocabulary through reading and talking. Through modelling, children can make the connections between what they hear, say, read, and write. Pascal (2009) pointed out that "listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all interrelated and development in one area supports development in all" (p. 20). Gunn, Simmons and Kameenui (1995) concur that the ability to recognize the concept of oral language being converted to print is important for early reading and writing experiences. The authors say that understanding letter knowledge and phonological awareness are skills that children need to master if they are to be successful in learning how to read and write. Because children come to school, from varied backgrounds, not all children will understand the difference between oral language and print.

Reading to, and with, children leads to vocabulary acquisition, an understanding of how language goes together (syntax), and an increase in their ability to understand the meaning of written text. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) say that "there is a strong relationship between vocabulary development and reading achievement" (p.2). The authors also say the knowledge that children learn from listening and speaking contributes to their ability to read and write. As well, vocabulary development, through oral language, helps children develop important comprehension strategies.

2) To teach phonological connections

Children who are read to, or read, books with rhyming patterns learn phonological awareness (ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds - phonemes) in spoken words and is an important indicator of later school success (Adams, 1990, Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) say that young children can be taught to recognize and name the letters in an informal way. This connection between letters and sounds can be fostered by teachers, parents, and/or other adults through reading and speaking. Gunn et al (1995) say that "letter knowledge measured at the beginning of kindergarten was one of two best predictors of reading achievement at the end of kindergarten and first grade" (p. 10).

Since English is an alphabetic language it is important that children understand that what is written down is represented by the sounds that are spoken. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) say that "knowledge of the alphabet letters and phonological awareness form the basis of early decoding and spelling ability, and both are correlated with later reading and spelling achievement" (p. 5). Children need to be immersed in language rich environments in order to develop phonological awareness; in order for children to learn the letters of the alphabet they need lots of exposure to the alphabet. This exposure can take many forms: reading books, manipulating magnetic letters, using building blocks, in attempts to write, etc. However, for most children exposure is not enough, they need to be explicitly taught the alphabet (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

Learning about phonemes (units of sound represented by the letters) is necessary if children are to learn the alphabetic principles. Until children learn about the phonemic structure of the language it is difficult for them to articulate beginning or end sounds of words. Snow et

al. (1998) say that "few children acquire phonemic awareness spontaneously; attaining phonemic awareness is difficult for most children and far more difficult for some than others" (p. 54).

Snow et al. (1998) found that it was "measures of semantic and syntactic skills, rather than speech discrimination and articulation that predicted phonological awareness" (p. 53). The ability to discern phonological differences was dependent on the general language abilities of the children. The authors observed that the "development of phonological awareness was closely intertwined with growth in basic language proficiency during the preschool years" (p. 53).

3) To foster knowledge and understanding about print and its use.

Gunn et al. (1995) say that "experiences with print (through reading and writing) give preschool children an understanding of the conventions, purpose, and function of print – understandings that have been shown to play an integral part in learning to read" (p. 5). The authors' further state that children learn the conventions of print from listening to stories where they learn how stories are structured semantically, and how text is set on the printed page. Children who understand print-related terms tend to be more successful in school because they have an understanding of the vocabulary used in the classroom.

Children who come to school without being exposed to the vocabulary of instruction can find school related tasks more difficult. Gunn et al. (1995) say that because of differences in parental support for literacy, children do not come to school with the same print related experiences. As a result, their knowledge of these experiences differs from their peers who have had exposure to daily literacy routines in their homes.

Materials needed in a quality preschool

1) Books

Children's experiences with books greatly influence their ability to comprehend what they read (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). These experiences can take the form of reading with adults, looking at books independently, and sharing books with peers. Children's knowledge about print comes from their experiences with books and other written materials. Books foster early literacy development by building background knowledge about a variety of subjects and demonstrating concepts about print.

Listening to books can expand children's imagination, foster vocabulary knowledge, and extend their understanding of grammar and syntax. When children listen to stories they gain an understanding of how stories are put together; this allows them to follow simple texts and become familiar with the meaning of print. When children practice the art of retelling stories they gain experience in how to think logically, how to sequence, and how to focus their attention, and memory on what they read or heard (Pascal, 2008).

2) Manipulatives

In a preschool classroom, space is usually organized around centres (Pascal, 2008). The activity centres are typically organized around a variety of materials that promote individual or group activities. These centres could include: a house for dramatic play, block centres, painting, visual arts, books, listening centre, puppet corner, a computer, and a writing centre. Pascal (2008) says that the "physical manipulation of three dimensional materials and pencils, markers, crayons, and paint brushes builds children's capacity for planning, remembering, and representing their experiences and understandings. As well, drawings, collages, paintings, and block building can be incorporated into children's' play" (p. 19).

Teachers have to select materials for the classroom that do not limit choices for the children. Materials have to allow children to form their own structures that are conducive to creative thinking and problem solving (Brewer, 1995). Materials such as sand, water, and blocks, do not have built in functions that could limit how they are used. Brewer (1995) stressed the importance of providing materials that allow children to make play choices and allow multiple outcomes such as dress-up clothes, hand puppets, art supplies, books, computer, board games, and science equipment such as magnets, magnifying glasses, and scales to name a few.

Play fosters early learning

Pascal (2008), in his report, underscores the importance of play for children as they explore their environment and the world around them. Children learn by manipulating objects, acting out roles, and experimenting with various materials. The author says that "play is a vehicle for learning and lies at the core of innovation and creativity" (p. 8). Play allows children to learn in a context that fosters 'safe' exploration; they seek out challenges that can be accomplished.

When children engage in pretend play the learning opportunities are many: they learn not only how to get along with others, but they learn the structure of stories, how to set goals, how to carry them out, and how to communicate. This communication can make use of very complex language depending on the play involved. Pascal (2008) found that "children in complex pretend play situations use more advanced language and have higher levels of narrative structure than they do in other situations" (p. 9). The ability to use "more advanced oral language is linked to later reading comprehension and fluency" (Pascal, 2008, p. 9).

Brewer (1995) says that "play contributes to cognitive growth, aids social and emotional development, and is essential to physical development" (p. 148). She goes on to say that "many

of the abilities required to succeed in school settings are gained through play experiences" (p. 148). She defines cognitive growth as an increase in the child's knowledge base. Cognitive abilities "include identifying, classifying, sequencing, observing, discriminating, making predictions, drawing conclusions, comparing, and determining cause and effect relationships" (p. 148). Developing these intellectual abilities will determine how successful children will be in all academic areas.

All children do not develop at the same rate (Essa & Rogers, 1992), but developmental norms give educators a general idea of what children at different ages can accomplish. For example, language development in preschoolers is rapid (Essa & Rogers, 1992), with a large increase in vocabulary acquisition as children get older. Essa and Rogers (1992) found that sentence length and complexity increase with age. It is important to remember that developmental norms are just guidelines because the rates of development vary with each child. These differences are affected by the child's innate personality, cognitive traits, family background, and overall health (Essa & Rogers, 1992). Therefore program planning must take into account the individuals as well as the shared characteristics of all the children in the class. It is only by being aware of the needs of the group as well as the needs of the individuals can a preschool teacher maintain a high quality program.

Conclusion

Children who have not developed some basic literacy skills by the time they enter school are three-four times more likely to drop out in later years, (National Adult Literacy Survey, (1002) NCES, U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Snow et al. (1998) say that "academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of grade three" (p. 21). Strickland and Riley-Ayers

(2006) say that children who "fall behind in oral language and literacy development in the years before formal schooling are less likely to be successful beginning readers and the achievement lag is likely to persist throughout the primary grades and beyond" (p. 3).

Early literacy programs need to build on the background that the child brings to school. The "curriculum should be implemented in ways that foster respect for what children bring to the learning situation and provide continuity between the child's experiences at home and those within the early childhood program" (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006, p. 6). The importance of parental involvement and children's early literacy development has been established (Snow et al, 1998). It has been found that children who come from homes where the parents model the uses of literacy are better prepared for school. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) found that it was:

> not the frequency of book reading or even the quality of the talk that accompanies book reading alone that is related to children's language and literacy abilities, but the broader pattern of parent-child activities and interactions that support children's language and literacy development (p. 9).

They go on to say that it is important to make sure that all parents, especially low-income and low education parents, understand that everyday experiences that are accompanied by talk can improve their children's language and literacy development.

Pascal (2008) in his report to the Government of Ontario said that preschool programs should "not [try] to replicate the sort of teacher-directed program that characterizes grade school; it is to create an environment of child-directed activity that mobilizes the child's interest and imagination" (p. iii). Bruner (1966) said that children who are interested and curious will be more engaged in learning but that children cannot be trained to be interested and curious. Pascal (2009), made the point that the foundation for lifelong learning has to be nurtured in the early

years. He also said that "the goal [of preschool programs] is not to push academic work or learning expectations onto younger children but to identify and enhance the connections between the expectations and experiences that extend from the Early Learning Program into the primary grades" (p.1).

When determining if half-day, full-day, or alternating days are best for preschool children, care must be taken to determine which is the best approach for individual children. What is important is the type and quality of the program, a method of continuous evaluation, and a plan that provides for excellent experiences (Brewer, 1995). Brewer (1995) goes on to say that a "full-day program that involves children in inappropriate activities is not beneficial to children, even though they are there longer than children in half, or alternate day programs" (p. 133). Brewer also says that decisions about the type of program offered should be made based on which program provides the optimal learning environment for the students.

Considerations

Before making any decision about the merits of funding all-day, every-day kindergarten for all children, some considerations for adopting such a program must be addressed.

Costs versus long term benefits

Whenever the question of implementing a new program is raised one of the main considerations has to be the cost of the program. Governments need to determine if it is cost-effective to fund an all-day, every-day kindergarten program for all children, and to further determine if the long-term benefits of such a program out-weigh the initial and continuing costs.

The jury is still out on the long-term benefits of providing early intervention strategies to disadvantaged children. *Head Start* began with the idea that poverty could be ameliorated by getting poor children into school related activities sooner rather than later (Rose, 2009). The

idea of teaching preschool children literacy skills along with teaching their parents how to become better parents was behind the *Head Start* program. This program made certain assumptions about children; "the most persistent was that poor children suffered from poor parenting as well as from poverty" (Rose, 2009, p. 222).

Hiebert and Taylor (2000) found that "the long term effects on children's learning points to an immediate effect for early reading interventions that steadily decreases in subsequent years" (p. 479). The authors find that some educators tend to use the lack of long-term benefits as a reason, to question the profit of preschool programs. One of the reasons, that early literacy benefits do not seem to persist past the early years, could be a result of the different reading strategies needed as children progress through the school system that are not related to simply recognizing words. However, without the knowledge of how to recognize words students would not have the basics to be able to comprehend the new instruction in how to read informational text (Hiebert & Taylor, 2000). Plus, there is no way of knowing how far children would be behind their peers without the intervention in the first place.

There does not appear to be any question that quality preschools have an impact on children's literacy acquisition. Several studies quoted in this paper (Rose, 2009, Sammons et al, 2004, Sylva et al, 2005, Zakaluk et al, 2005,) extol the virtues of preschool programs in fostering emergent literacy especially in disadvantaged children. The discussion then becomes one of determining the optimal length of preschool programs: all-day, every-day; half-days, every-day; alternate full-days; alternate half-days; or some combination of the four.

Recommendations

Governments should take into consideration the following recommendations before making their decision to implement an all-day, every-day kindergarten program.

1. Child-Centred versus Curriculum Centred

Any preschool program implemented should not have to follow the same guidelines that typify the direct-instruction, structured classroom activities that are found in elementary classrooms (Pascal, 2009). Pascal (2009) further explains that "research and best practice indicate clearly that a deliberate and effective play-based approach supports young children's cognitive development" (p. 25). Curby et al (2009) agreed that "exposing four year old children to appropriately stimulating instructional and social activities with the intention of increasing school-related achievement skills and social competence at the time that the children enter kindergarten" (p. 367), should be the goal of preschool programs. Preschool classrooms have to be well-designed environments that will allow children to further explore their own interests (Pascal, 2009). Pascal (2009) further says that "how time is scheduled, how space is organized, and how things are set up to engage young minds matter to the quality of early learning environments" (p. 25).

Each preschool classroom, if it is to be successful, has to offer many and varied opportunities for children to play with learning. When mandating all-day, every-day, preschool programs the goal should be to ensure that all classrooms have the same environment for learning. There would have to be an abundance of books, and manipulatives that would serve to engage preschool children's learning. Classrooms that lack the materials necessary to motivate young children to want to experiment with their surroundings would severely limit the benefits of an all-day, every-day program. There would need to be a common framework for all preschool settings.

2. Teacher Training

Teachers, who will be teaching preschool and kindergarten children, need to be trained in early childhood education. Pascal (2009) recommended that preschool programs be "staffed by teams of certified teachers and registered early childhood educators (ECEs)" (p. 32). The educators need to be "skilled at applying child development knowledge" (Pascal, 2009, p. 32) so that the programs they plan will be age-appropriate. de Witt (2009) said that it has been determined that the quality of preschool programmes should be developmentally appropriate. de Witt (2009) goes on to say that the educator plays a major role in determining the quality of the program. Strickland and Riley-Ayers (2006) go even further when discussing what skills preschool teachers require. They propose that teachers "need to know the importance of oral language competencies, early literacy experiences, and family literacy in learning to read" (p. 8). As well, they have to be "able to use a variety of instructional methods that are age and developmentally appropriate and have the ability to adjust those methods to the specific needs of individuals" (p.8). Ongoing professional development is also important because the knowledge base that teachers require changes as new knowledge is gained.

Pascal (2009) in his recommendations suggested that "the program quality that young children experience depends on educators who are far more than technicians implementing a prescribed set of activities driven by generic learning standards" (p. 32). Pascal also recommended that teachers focus on an emergent approach which "builds on a child's curiosity, intrinsic interests, and self-discovery" (p.32).

3. Full-Day versus Half-Day

The problem that arises is determining the length of time children should attend preschool and what things children should learn in a preschool program. All-day, every-day

preschool programs can help foster literacy in preschool children if they are set up to assist children in acquiring the skills necessary to succeed in school; but not if they are structured to 'fast track' children academically. While emergent literacy programs that follow a quality curriculum have been shown to help children develop the elements that strongly predict future school success, there are many programs that are not rigorous and will not help children develop the skills needed to succeed.

Pascal (2009) in his discussion of half-day versus full-day found that research from Canadian studies "showed that full-day preschool programs promoted children's successful transition to formal schooling. Children attending full-day programs had better academic performance and social success as they entered grade 1 than children who attended half-day programs" (p. 12). As well, he quotes a Rutgers University study which "found that prolonged and regular full-day attendance significantly increased children's verbal and mathematics test scores in grade one and beyond" (p.12).

In contrast, Sammons et al (2004) found that without further analysis, they could not conclude that lower literacy readiness scores for children, who did not attend preschool, were necessarily due to the lack of preschool experience. There are so many other factors that could contribute to children's lack of progress in literacy such as the child themselves, the family, and the home background. In their study of children who attended preschool versus those who did not, the authors found that the duration of the preschool program was more important than the length of the school day. Children who entered preschools between the ages of two and three had higher cognitive attainments that those who started later.

Also, Burnett, Frede, Mobasher, and Mohr (1987) studied the "effects of a statewide preschool program for four year olds who were judged to be at high risk of later academic

difficulties" (p. 37). The students met for half-days, every-day, and teachers, who were certified in early childhood education, made use of a highly developed cognitive-developmental curriculum. The authors found evidence of a positive effect of preschool education on school readiness but had some concerns about the findings. The authors wondered if the positive results for their study were due to the highly qualified teachers that taught in the experimental preschool classrooms, and the low pupil-teacher ratio. Classrooms used in the study had a full-time aide and classes served up to 20 students only. The authors said it was unclear "what intensity or quality of preschool intervention is needed to produce significant increases in the school readiness and success of disadvantaged children" (p. 38). Also, they said it was "unclear what characteristics of early childhood programs define quality and contribute to effectiveness" (p. 38).

Final Say

The implementation of an all-day, every-day preschool program is not the best option for children at this time. Just lengthening the school day, for young children, will not guarantee better literacy skills when they enter grade one. Instead, strengthening the existing preschool programs so that they adhere to some type of standardized program makes the most sense. de Witt (2009) found that it was not just any preschool program that was beneficial; there is a need for quality programs that will be beneficial for children to foster their developmental well-being.

Children, of all SES groups, should have the same access to the types of programs that will benefit them the most. As well, children should be exposed to instruction, from qualified teachers, on developing their oral language, their alphabet knowledge, and their phonemic awareness. These should not be 'taught' in any formal way but instead children should be allowed to 'discover' the knowledge informally with careful scaffolding from their teacher and

other adults in their environment. Programs that are "schoolified" do not help children develop literacy skills, and teachers must remember that only developmentally appropriate activities will assistant children in acquiring literacy (Pascal, 2009).

Any program that is developed needs to have a strong parent component built in. Children do not develop in a vacuum; they learn from others in their social environment. A page needs to be taken out of the *Head Start* program that plans interventions around the home life of the child. Parents need to become active participants in their children's literacy development and schools need to invite more parents into the system especially at the preschool level. Without this parental support, it does not matter if the child is in school all-day, every-day, or only half-days, every-day.

Just providing more of the same, in a longer day, will not enhance preschooler's literacy experience unless more of the same involves activities that will challenge children's natural curiosity (Pascal, 2009). It would be beneficial for governments who are thinking of implementing longer school days for preschoolers to first determine their purpose for such a program.

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