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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings from an empirical study of the readiness of elementary principals in the State of Iowa for group pre-kindergarten education. The study was based on responses of principals to items in a mail questionnaire and was directed at discovering their attitudes and knowledge about selected issues in group pre-kindergarten education. Findings indicate that the principals are positively oriented to group pre-kindergarten education and are rather knowledgeable about what it entails. The implications of these findings are that the elementary principals will in general be able to handle competently the problems that will arise in administering group pre-kindergarten education in their schools. (Author/MS)

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ARE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS READY FOR GROUP PRE-KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION?

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN IOWA

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Abstract

This article reports the findings from an empirical study of the readiness of elementary principals in the State of Iowa for group pre-kindergarten education. The study was based on responses of principals to items in a mail questionnaire; it was directed at discovering their attitudes and knowledge about selected issues in group pre-kindergarten education. The findings themselves are very encouraging. They indicate that the principals are positively oriented to group pre-kindergarten education and are rather knowledgeable about what it entails. The implications of these findings are that the elementary principals will in general be able to handle competently the problems that will arise in administering group pre-kindergarten education in their schools.

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN IOWA¹

Introduction

During the past decade there has been a good deal of interest among American parents and educators in the need for and possibilities of group pre-kindergarten education. This interest has occasioned a continuing, lively discussion of who should sponsor group pre-kindergarten education and, if the public schools take on this role, of how they could best provide such education. Since elementary schools are logical sites for group pre-kindergarten education within the public schools, the principals at this level need to be prepared to exercise the leadership necessary for appropriate programs. Group pre-kindergarten education does not now exist on a wide scale in elementary schools, but its expansion is certainly imminent. Because of this prospect, it is imperative to find out whether elementary principals currently on the job are ready to assume the additional leadership responsibilities for pre-kindergarten programs.

This article reports the findings from an empirical study of the readiness of elementary principals in the State of Iowa for group pre-kindergarten education. The study was based on responses of principals to items in a mail questionnaire; it was directed at discovering their attitudes and knowledge about selected issues in group pre-kindergarten education. The findings themselves are very encouraging. They indicate that the principals are positively oriented to group pre-kindergarten education and are rather knowledgeable about what it entails.

The implications of these findings are that the elementary principals will in general be able to handle competently the problems that will arise in administering group pre-kindergarten education in their schools.

The article begins with a definition of the concept of readiness of elementary principals for group pre-kindergarten education. The next section presents the issues selected for the study. Then, after sections describing which Iowa elementary principals participated in the study and how data on their attitudes and knowledge were collected, there is a section summarizing those views. The final section notes some implications of the study for the prospects of group pre-kindergarten education in the elementary schools.

The Concept of Readiness of Elementary Principals*

Obviously, there must be some gauge by which to answer the question posed in the title, "Are elementary principals ready for group pre-kindergarten education?" The gauge used in this study is the match on selected issues in the field between the views of elementary principals and the stance of those who write about pre-kindergarten education. The matter of the match is crucial to the notion of readiness.

The reason for choosing this gauge of readiness is grounded in how elementary principals currently on the job keep abreast of developments such as group pre-kindergarten education. As a major part of their in-service education, elementary principals read professional journals; and in this way they are exposed to what writers, usually current or former educational practitioners, have to say about these developments.

The Selected Issues and the Stance of Writers in the Field

Before undertaking the study of the attitudes and knowledge of elementary principals about group pre-kindergarten education, it was first necessary to identify the most important definitional and theoretical issues in the field and to ascertain the stance of writers in the field on these issues. An analysis of the literature in the field of pre-kindergarten education indicated that the important definitional and theoretical issues cluster under the following four main headings and questions:² (1) Clientele: Which children should be involved in group pre-kindergarten programs? (2) Personnel: Who should staff group pre-kindergarten programs? (3) Programing: What should be the nature of the group pre-kindergarten program? (4) Organization: How should the group pre-kindergarten program be organized and sponsored? These headings and questions are described more fully in the paragraphs below, and the stance of writers in the field on them is summarized.³

Questions involving the clientele to be served in group pre-kindergarten programs are especially important because at least initially and perhaps for some considerable period of time not all pre-kindergarten aged children will be enrolled in group programs, even if such enrollment were deemed to be desirable. At what age should children first be involved in group educational experiences? Most writers in the field of pre-kindergarten education are convinced of the importance of the early years in setting the stage of optimal later development and education, but there has by no means been agreement that group pre-kindergarten

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programs should be the primary avenue of positive intervention into the lives of young children. Should the socio-economic status and background of children affect their enrollment in group pre-kindergarten programs? Much of the current interest and momentum of pre-kindergarten education is due to the public and professional attention paid to the compensatory education programs of the 1960's, and most writers in the field favor giving priority for enrollment in pre-kindergarten programs to children who are in greatest need of stimulation. How universal is the need for group pre-kindergarten experiences? Most writers in the field agree that all or most pre-kindergarten children could benefit from appropriate group programs. What effect should the physical and mental health of children have on their enrollment in group pre-kindergarten programs? Children with handicapping conditions are being brought increasingly into the educational mainstream, and most writers in the field advocate this mainstreaming as well as the provision of educational services for pre-kindergarten children with handicapping or "high risk" conditions.

Questions relating to the adult personnel in group pre-kindergarten programs come to the fore because of the implicit relationship between the quality of teaching and the quality of learning. What training and/or certification qualifies individuals to teach in group pre-kindergarten programs? Most writers assert that there is a need for well-prepared teachers in group pre-kindergarten programs; and, in keeping with this assertion, most writers in the field tend to agree that specialized training and certification is necessary for pre-kindergarten teachers. What should be the nature of parental involvement in group pre-kindergarten

garten programs? Some well-known programs, such as Project Head Start, have encouraged parents of children enrolled to play an important role in the actual program for the children, and most writers in the field tend to agree that there should be a strong emphasis in pre-kindergarten programs on work with parents. What should be the ratio of teaching staff to children in group pre-kindergarten programs?⁴ The ratio of teaching staff to children governs aspects of the program which can be implemented, and most writers in the field recommend minimum ratios of one teacher, one full-time teacher aide, and one volunteer for fifteen to twenty three- and four-year-old children. Does the gender of staff members make a difference in group pre-kindergarten programs? The overwhelming majority of teachers in group pre-kindergarten programs are women, and some writers in the field recommend the introduction of more male teachers because of the need for both male and female adult models.

Questions about the actual program for group pre-kindergarten education are very important because they impinge directly on the experience of the children enrolled. What theories of development and learning serve as the bases for decisions about programing? Most writers in the field are in substantial agreement on the seven theories of development and learning which seem to have influenced pre-kindergarten programing during the past fifteen years: (1) Most writers see the old "nature-nurture controversy" as having been replaced by a concept of "nature-nurture collaboration." (2) Most writers in the field believe that early development provides the base on which later development depends. (3) Most but not all writers are in agreement on the "whole child" view of

development and think that it is important for pre-kindergarten programs to interpret the educational function broadly enough to provide experiences to develop social, emotional, physical, as well as intellectual competencies. (4) Most writers subscribe to the idea advanced by Jean Piaget that cognitive development proceeds by stages which follow a consistent order. (5) Most writers in the field believe in the veracity of the often repeated rule of thumb that learning can proceed to the abstract level only after many concrete experiences. (6) Most writers in the field recognize the importance of individualizing the group pre-kindergarten program in order to respond to the ability and needs of individual children. (7) And, most writers in the field acknowledge the importance to a child's intellectual functioning of the nutritional and health status. What goals and objectives for group pre-kindergarten education seem to follow logically from these theories of development and learning? First, most writers in the field are generally agreed that comprehensive goals are consistent with these theories -- i.e., reflecting the "whole child" concept, involving work with parents, providing needed nutritional and health services, and maintaining continuity between pre-kindergarten programs and elementary education. But, second, there is not complete agreement among writers in the field about whether relatively more emphasis should be placed on process or on product-oriented goals in pre-kindergarten education. What teaching methodology should be used in group pre-kindergarten programs? Up to the present time, the emphasis of work in pre-kindergarten education has been on development of curricula rather than on teaching methodology, and it

is therefore not surprising that writers in the field have not come to a consensus about methodology. What effects on children and on curricula at the elementary level have been noted as a result of group pre-kindergarten programs? Most writers in the field note that cognitive gains are made by children in the course of group pre-kindergarten programs; however, in most cases these gains have not been maintained through the primary years in regular elementary programs. Most writers in the field agree that pre-kindergarten programs should have an effect on curriculum in the primary grades.

Questions dealing with the organization of pre-kindergarten programs are derivative of the questions of clientele, personnel, and programing. What societal group or groups should sponsor pre-kindergarten programs? There are advocates of sponsorship by private groups, social services, and the public school system; but there is as yet no consensus among writers in the field. What should be the length of the day in group pre-kindergarten programs? The length has varied because of the dual functions served -- child care and education -- and again there is no consensus among writers in the field about which function should prevail. What funding priorities should be applied to decisions involving group pre-kindergarten programs? Once again, writers in the field have not come to agreement on this question.

The study of the attitudes and knowledge of elementary principals about group pre-kindergarten education treated definitional and theoretical issues from these four main headings -- clientele, personnel, programing, and organization.

Elementary Principals in the Study

The imminent expansion of group pre-kindergarten education in the elementary schools resulted in a focus on the views of principals currently working at this level. By virtue of their position, elementary principals would play a crucial leadership role in administering pre-kindergarten programs. First, they would guide change and implement goals. Second, they would have primary responsibility for supervising and improving instruction. And, third, they would be accountable for the success or failure of the programs.

The study included all 679 individuals who during the 1974-1975 academic year served as elementary principals in Iowa schools.⁵ Gathering information on the views of all rather than a sample of elementary principals in the State of Iowa allowed more accurate generalization of findings.

Method of Data Collection

The large size of the population to be surveyed necessitated the use of a mail questionnaire.⁶ The questionnaire contained two parts in addition to instructions. Part I requested background information about the respondents and their schools. Part II asked respondents to indicate their views about selected issues in pre-kindergarten education.

Part II of the questionnaire included fifty-eight items or statements about the issues previously identified as important ones in the field of pre-kindergarten education. A five-point Likert-type scale was used as the response format in this part of the questionnaire. Items

about important issues in pre-kindergarten education were phrased so that respondents would select alternatives almost equally at the lower and upper ends of a scale. The items were refined during a pilot study; and their final arrangement in the questionnaire was determined through random assignment.

Approximately 65% of Iowa elementary principals responded to the questionnaire. Comparison of the respondents to the entire population of Iowa elementary principals on the demographic characteristics of gender and age indicated that the respondents seemed to be representative of the population.

Views of the Elementary Principals

Analysis of the responses of Iowa elementary principals provided important and interesting information about their readiness for group pre-kindergarten education. A summary of these views is organized according to the major definitional and theoretical issues on which the study is based.⁷ On all issues for which the stance of writers in the field is clear, there is a good match between that stance and the views of principals.

Clientele

Age of Children. A majority of elementary principals believe that kindergarten is not soon enough to begin teaching young children in a group setting. But, many principals also believe that children should be at least four years of age before they receive group pre-kindergarten

education. In other words, many principals would limit enrollment in group pre-kindergarten programs to children who are within one year of being eligible for kindergarten.

Socio-Economic Status and Background. A majority of principals believe that priority should be placed on the pre-kindergarten education of disadvantaged children who are in need of stimulation. However, it is important to note that the percentages are only slightly over 50 per cent on the two relevant items in the questionnaire.

Universality of Need for Group Programs. Nearly three-quarters of the elementary principals believe that all children could benefit from appropriate group pre-kindergarten programs. And, although a majority of principals think that pre-kindergarten children should ideally receive education in their own homes from their own parents, a majority also judge that in point of fact most parents do not provide the opportunities for intellectual development needed by pre-kindergarten aged children.

Physical/Mental Health. Most principals believe that the education of pre-kindergarten handicapped children should be a public responsibility. Furthermore, in keeping with the philosophy of mainstreaming, a majority of principals reject the idea that pre-kindergarten handicapped children should be educated separately from other children. Many of them think that pre-kindergarten education should be provided for handicapped children before it is provided for other children; but the percentage is less than 50 per cent.

Personnel

Training/Certification of Staff. Principals overwhelmingly reject the idea that pre-kindergarten teachers require less professional training than elementary teachers. They believe that pre-kindergarten teachers should be paid on the same salary schedule as other teachers. Furthermore, almost all of them think that pre-kindergarten teachers should have special training and certification in early childhood education. Many take issue with the idea of employing teachers already in the district for any new group pre-kindergarten programs, even if staff reductions would otherwise be necessary; however, there is an unusually large undecided response on this particular item in the questionnaire.

A substantial majority of principals reject the idea that pre-kindergarten teacher aides are as competent in making educational decisions as are teachers. Over half of the principals believe that these aides should have special training and certification in early childhood education.

Parent Involvement. Almost all principals think that active and continuous involvement of parents in the experiences of a child while in a group pre-kindergarten program has positive effects on learning. Accordingly, most of them reject the idea that parents should generally remain on the other side of the school door. Most principals, however, do not consider that parents are as competent in making educational decisions as are teachers; this belief may possibly be related to their feeling that most parents do not provide the opportunities for intellectual development needed by young children.

Ratio of Staff to Children: Over three-quarters of the principals believe that there should be at least one teacher and one full-time teacher aide for each fifteen four year olds. Nearly that many principals do not consider that the same adult-child ratio as now found in kindergarten programs is appropriate in pre-kindergarten programs; this view may indicate that principals are not satisfied with the current ratios in kindergartens.

Programing

Theories of Development/Learning. A large percentage of principals reject the idea that achievement depends more on genetic or biological endowment than on environmental influences. Most principals believe that the first years of a child's life represent the most important period for priming a child's cognitive development. And, over three-quarters of the principals think that encouraging intellectual development need not discourage healthy social-emotional development.

Most principals think that intellectual functioning proceeds by stages and follows a consistent order. Also, the majority of principals believe that the learning of young children moves from the concrete to the abstract level, rather than vice-versa; however, the undecided group is rather large in this case. Responding to an item about early reading, most principals indicate belief that the child who is interested and seems ready should be taught; in other words, there is belief in the idea of individualizing this aspect of the pre-kindergarten curriculum. Finally, almost all principals think that hunger or poor health

constitutes a barrier to the learning of young children.

Goals/Objectives. Two items assess the extent to which elementary principals consider their colleagues to be knowledgeable about the goals and objectives of pre-kindergarten education described in the literature and espoused in their communities. Responding to these items, nearly half of the principals indicate that a lack of knowledge prevails. However, one cannot judge what gauge of knowledge the principals applied to their colleagues in this case.

The principals think that group pre-kindergarten programs should embrace comprehensive goals and objectives. For instance, nearly all of the principals believe that experiences designed to achieve social learnings should be as important as those designed to achieve cognitive learnings. And, nine out of ten principals think that systematic education programs should be available to parents of pre-kindergarten children. Also, a high percentage of principals believe that adequate pre-kindergarten programs should provide needed health and nutritional services to children; however the magnitude of agreement with this item is considerably less than with the one about hunger or poor health being a barrier to learning. Finally, almost all principals believe that there should be continuity of program goals at the pre-kindergarten and elementary levels.

On two items designed to place principals along a process/product-oriented continuum, the majority of principals indicate an affinity for process-oriented goals for pre-kindergarten children. They believe that learning specific skills is less important than having many and varied

trips and experiences. And, they think that creative activities such as music, art, and movement should receive more emphasis than formal readiness activities.

Teaching Methods. Most principals believe in the importance of individualizing the group pre-kindergarten programs in order to respond to the ability and needs of the children. They also support the idea that a diversity in methodology should be reflected in group pre-kindergarten programs; however, this item does not differentiate between diversity of methodology within a program or from program to program. And, most principals do not approve of pre-kindergarten programming which requires children to participate in activities mainly as one group.

On some items relating to teaching methods, the principals tend to be process-oriented. For example, a majority reject the idea that the most important learning experiences in a group pre-kindergarten program are those directly led by a teacher. Furthermore, nearly half think that children learn best from self-selected activities within a well-planned environment.

A large majority of principals believe that the main purpose of spontaneous play in a group pre-kindergarten program should be to provide for social-emotional experiences. This response could be interpreted as being product-oriented, since process-oriented planners attribute considerable importance to the intellectual growth possibilities of children's play.

Program Effects. Many principals know that the significantly higher scores on I.Q. tests of children in group pre-kindergarten

programs typically have not tended to persist into the intermediate grades; however, over 40 per cent of the principals are undecided and this level of indecision indicates a probable lack of familiarity with the relevant research results. Over three-quarters of the principals think that widespread pre-kindergarten attendance should cause changes in the kindergarten and primary curricula.

Organization

Sponsorship. A majority of principals reject the idea that group pre-kindergarten programs should remain in the private sector and think instead that public funds should be used to support pre-kindergarten education. Many believe that group pre-kindergarten programs could be housed in empty elementary classrooms. And, over three-quarters of the principals think that economic considerations would encourage local school districts to add group pre-kindergarten programs if the same state funds were made available for pre-kindergarten as for elementary children. Furthermore, almost all principals believe that if group pre-kindergarten education becomes a public responsibility, it should be under the administration of existing Boards of Education.

Length of Program. Most principals seem to support the educational but not the child care function of group pre-kindergarten education programs. For instance, over three-quarters of the principals think that pre-kindergarten programs should be a maximum of two to three hours in length. And, most principals reject the idea that full-day, publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs should be available to meet

the needs of children in families with working parents.

Funding Priorities. On questions of economic feasibility, the principals are fairly evenly split among the agree, undecided, and disagree responses. Principals tend to think that it is economically feasible to provide publicly funded pre-kindergarten education for all children and that it is economically feasible to maintain ratios of one teacher and one full-time teacher aide for each fifteen children in group pre-kindergarten programs. However, these responses are well under 40 per cent -- far short of a majority. And, as noted earlier, many of the principals interpret "all children" as being "all four year olds."

On matters of priorities, the principals tend to reject the idea that public resources should be used to improve elementary education rather than to begin pre-kindergarten programs and to accept the idea that a higher priority on using public funds would be to implement a 1:15 teacher-child ratio in all kindergartens. However, again the percentages are less than 50%.

Implications

There is a good match between the views of Iowa elementary principals and the stance of those who write about pre-kindergarten education. Thus, this study finds an affirmative answer to the question posed in the title, "Are elementary principals ready for group pre-kindergarten education?"

The responses of Iowa elementary principals indicate that in general

they are positively oriented to group pre-kindergarten education and are rather knowledgeable about what it entails. Administering pre-kindergarten programs within the public schools will involve making some difficult decisions, but the principals appear to be prepared for making appropriate judgments. Although the transition to new programing is never easy, the readiness of elementary principals for group pre-kindergarten education seems to bode well for facilitation of the transition, at least in the State of Iowa. This qualification is in order because all of the elementary principals in the study were from the State of Iowa. Further research in other states will be necessary to ascertain the generality of the findings and, to give an overview of the readiness of principals nationally for group pre-kindergarten education.

As was mentioned frequently in the section titled, "The Selected Issues and the Stance of Writers in the Field," there are some issues on which there is little consensus among various writers and, indeed, on which there has not been articulation of alternatives. In other words, many of the difficult decisions which elementary principals will face vis-a-vis pre-kindergarten education are also ones with which educators in the field of pre-kindergarten education are still wrestling. It makes good sense for educators at the pre-kindergarten level to work together with elementary principals on critical and heretofore unresolved issues in group pre-kindergarten education. Elementary principals could bring to the joint efforts a vast fund of practical experience at the elementary level; and because of their positive orientations and considerable knowledge about group pre-kindergarten education, they could

constructively take part in those efforts. The help of elementary principals in resolving issues on which there is currently no consensus could have positive effects on the theory and practice of group pre-kindergarten education.

Footnotes

1. Advice and feedback from Jerry N. Kuhn on this study are gratefully acknowledged.
2. It is not possible to cite here all of the individual references consulted in identifying these issues. For a complete bibliography of literature consulted, see S. Anselmo, A study of the attitudes and knowledge of Iowa elementary principals about selected issues in pre-kindergarten education, Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Iowa, 1975.
3. For a more complete review of the stance of writers in the field, see S. Anselmo, op. cit., pp. 15-62.
4. Although the questionnaire concerned group pre-kindergarten education in general, certain items were phrased in terms of given age groups for the sake of specificity.
5. The information was provided by the Iowa Department of Public Instruction.
6. The literature indicates that a major problem in mail questionnaires is the probability of a low rate of return. (See, for instance, F. W. Kerlinger, Foundations of behavioral research, New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1973.) However, in this study, employing follow-up procedures minimized the seriousness of this problem.
7. For the purposes of this part of the data analysis, the "strongly agree" and "agree" responses were combined as were the "disagree" and "strongly disagree" responses.