

THE LINK BETWEEN DIFFERENT KINDERGARTEN ATTENDANCE MODES AND THE TYPE OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS OFFERED BY TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Eighty six kindergarten teachers from three Tasmanian school districts participated in a study to investigate differences in the teacher-directed learning program provided for children who attend differing modes of kindergarten, and to ascertain whether these teachers have different perceptions of the learning program. Data collection was undertaken through the use of postal surveys and small group interviews. Results from the study indicated that many children in Kinder/Prep classes were being provided with structured academic programs, whilst their half-day peers were receiving less didactic programs. The use of big books for the teaching of early reading was undertaken on a weekly basis in the majority of kindergartens involved in the study. Kinder/Prep groups and classes taught by half-day/full-day teachers were the highest users of photocopied worksheets each week. Kindergarten teachers who taught full days were found to hold similar perceptions regarding the learning program to teachers who only taught half-day sessions, although the practices of both teacher groups differed from their perceptions.

Keywords: full-day kindergarten, half-day kindergarten, early literacy practices, literacy-based worksheets in kindergarten, academic pressure in kindergarten

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, kindergarten-aged children (four to five years of age) in rural areas of Tasmania have been attending full-day (FD) sessions of kindergarten. During the last five years there has been a concerted and successful push by some educators and many parents to extend this provision to urban school areas in the state, where half-day (HD) sessions had been the norm. Rapid growth of full-day sessions of kindergarten has resulted, although limited research has been undertaken to ascertain whether this change is educationally advantageous for young children. School authorities in Tasmania make reference to the perceived advantages and disadvantages of full-day kindergarten attendance for young children, based upon the American experience and research (Elicker & Mathur, 1997; Rothenberg, 1995; Karweit, 1992; Cryan, Sheehan, Wiechel & Bandy-Hedden, 1992). However, the applicability of these findings for the Tasmanian setting must be questionable, given that the local children are twelve months younger in age than American kindergarten children.

In Tasmanian state schools, kindergarten teachers can have differing teaching responsibilities, covering the following scenarios:

- Half-day (HD) teachers – who **only** teach half-day sessions of kindergarten each week..
- Full-day (FD) teachers - who **only** teach full-day sessions of kindergarten each week.
- Half-day/Full-day (HD/FD) teachers - who teach **both** half-day **and** full-day kindergarten sessions each week.
- Kindergarten/Prep (K/P) teachers - who teach kindergarten **and** preparatory children (five and six year olds) in the same class each week, in full-day sessions (with the exception of one group).

The teachers who teach both full-day and half-day sessions of kindergarten have the longest contact hours each week, teaching two full days (total of twelve hours) and three long mornings (four hours each). This leaves these teachers with limited time for preparation and interaction with families and support agencies. On the other hand, teachers who teach only full-days or half-days have one day free each week for these support responsibilities.

LITERATURE AND STUDY QUESTIONS

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in designing early child development that will promote later academic school success. This focus has resulted in kindergarten education becoming more didactic. Typically, this involves the completion of worksheets, seat-work and early reading instruction (Rothenberg 1995). Katz (1999) contends that academically focussed curricula for pre-school and kindergarten children “typically adopt single pedagogical methods dominated by worksheets and drill and practice of discrete skills” and that these methods do not suit young learners (p.3). “Play and socialisation (have taken) a back seat to preparation for an increasingly rigorous first grade curriculum” challenge Elicker & Mathur (1997, p.460).

Added to this changing program provision, many American schools have moved from half-day to full-day sessions of kindergarten. Cryan et al. (1992) state that full-day programs could well become “extended versions of the academic pressure-cooker approach that has resulted in the downward extension of the first-grade curriculum” (p.200). Critics of full-day kindergartens argue that these programs “increase the stress of already inappropriate curriculum approaches” (Elicker & Mathur 1997, p.461), and that such programs are developmentally inappropriate for young children, and that accelerating them into formalised teaching has not been found to benefit them (Karweit, 1992). In addition, later research by West, Denton & Reaney (2000) found that there was little difference between full-day or half-day children in the levels of children’s reading and maths knowledge and skills at the end of the kindergarten year.

Nevertheless, owing to the increasing custodial role fulfilled by full-day kindergartens, Gullo (2000, p.23) state that full-day kindergartens are “probably here to stay” and therefore, it is important to investigate what children experience in full-day and half-day sessions of kindergarten, as it “may be more important than how long they are in the classroom each day” (Clark & Kirk, 2000, p. 231). Furthermore, Gullo and Maxwell (1997) state that it is important to investigate the different ways kindergarten programs are designed and implemented.

This paper sets out to address these issues and investigates the following questions:

- What, if any, differences are evident in the teacher-directed learning programs for children who are involved in differing attendance modes at kindergarten?
- Do kindergarten teachers who only teach half-day **or** full-day sessions each week have different perceptions of the kindergarten learning program, from those teachers who teach **both** half **and** full-day sessions each week?

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The target population for this study was kindergarten teachers from state schools in Tasmania. As it was impractical to survey all Tasmanian kindergarten teachers, three of the six educational districts were chosen, to provide a representative sample of the state-owned kindergartens and to allow

generalisations to be made from the study's results. The three school districts targeted comprised ninety-two schools, including primary and district high school settings, with all kindergarten teachers (n=104) in these schools being potential participants.

In this study, a dual approach to data gathering was utilized to generate both qualitative and quantitative information to be available for analysis. Surveys were used as the key data source, with interviews being undertaken after the administration of the surveys to allow for gathering of deeper insights into full-day and half-day kindergarten provisions. This process enabled a systematic approach to gathering and arranging data, whilst at the same time facilitating the process of drawing comparisons and contrasts, as well as providing insights (Burns 1998). Aspects of the survey being reported in this paper include closed questions (for demographic data) and scaled items. The first scaled tool employed comprised twenty items which asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each specific statement according to a four point fixed scale (*strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree*). In the development of these twenty scaled items, background information about full-day and half-day attendance at kindergarten was obtained from the work of a variety of American researchers (including Rothenberg 1995; Elicker & Mathur 1997; Clark & Kirk 2000). For the purpose of this article, two of the twenty scaled items (*'Full-day Kindergarten programs have a greater focus on academic learning than half-day programs'* and *'Teaching half-day Kindergarten sessions requires a less academically structured program than full-day sessions'*) have been used to investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the nature of the academic program being offered in Tasmanian kindergartens. Analysis of these data was undertaken in two stages, with the raw data firstly entered into an Excel spreadsheet, and then imported into the STATVIEW to enable descriptive and inferential analysis to be undertaken. In addition within the survey, teachers were asked to indicate the frequency (*weekly, occasionally, never*) with which they used certain teacher-directed practices and procedures within their class. After entry of these results into the spreadsheet, percentages were calculated to quantify the frequencies with which teachers undertook the stated practices/procedures within their class.

The other phase of the study involved the use of focus group interviews. Two groups, consisting of eight and ten self-nominated kindergarten teachers from differing areas of the state, were involved in discussing aspects arising from the findings of the survey, which needed further clarification and expansion. This interview format was chosen to allow greater flexibility by utilising open-ended questions which allowed the interviewees to express their personal opinions related to the questions or issues under review (Burns 1998). Data from the interviews were coded using the constant comparative method (Merriam 1998) where one segment of data is compared with another to determine similarities and differences.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Eighty six teachers (83% response rate) responded to this survey. Respondents comprised 53 full-day and 46 half-day teachers, with 13 involved in teaching both full-day and half-day kindergarten sessions. Responding kindergarten teachers were asked to specify the frequency with which they used teacher-directed early literacy practice/procedures within their learning program. The results received are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

FREQUENCY WITH WHICH KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS USED TEACHER-DIRECTED STRATEGIES IN TEACHING

Specific aspects of the learning program	Frequency of use	Teachers who only teach HD (n=29): HD results %	Teachers who only teach FD (n=31): FD results %	Teachers who taught both HD/FD (n=13): FD results %	Teachers who taught both HD/FD (n=13): HD results %	Teachers of K/P (n=13): Kinder results %
Photocopied worksheets	Each week	31	47	84	92	91
	Occasionally	28	23	8	8	-
	Never	41	30	8	-	9
Big books for teaching reading	Each week	87	83	100	100	100
	Occasionally	13	7	-	-	-
	Never	-	10	-	-	-
Home reading program	Each week	56	70	54	54	73
	Occasionally	19	10	-	-	-
	Never	25	20	46	46	27
Structured literacy program (eg Letterland)	Each week	13	13	15	15	30
	Occasionally	6	16	8	8	-
	Never	81	71	77	77	70
Whole class instruction in letter formation	Each week	22	40	31	38	73
	Occasionally	19	13	8	8	-
	Never	59	47	61	54	27

Photocopied worksheets were more likely to be used on a weekly basis in HD (92%) and FD (84%) kindergartens taught by HD/FD teachers and in K/P (91%) kindergartens. By comparison, children in only 31% of classes run by teachers who only taught HD kindergartens were given worksheets each week. Big books were used for teaching early reading skills in most kindergarten classes with 100% of K/P and HD/FD teachers reporting using these each week. Over all kindergarten classes, 94% of teachers used big books each week. Home reading programs were used on a weekly basis in 73% of K/P and 70% of FD classes. Teachers of only HD kindergartens (56%) were much less likely to operate a home reading program, and 46% of teachers who taught both HD/FD sessions each week reported never using this literacy strategy within their classroom.

Twice as many K/P teachers as other teachers reported using structured literacy programs. K/P teachers used whole class instruction in letter formation far more regularly than other kindergarten teachers. Indeed, 73% of K/P children were engaged in this instruction each week, whilst 59% of HD children with one teacher, and 61% of FD and 54% of HD children in HD/FD classes never received this type of instruction

Teachers were asked to rate their agreement with two statements based on a scale of one to four relating to *strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree* respectively. A mean score for the level of agreement with these two statements was calculated for each group of kindergarten teachers. Comparative analysis was then undertaken using STATVIEW, to establish any statistically significant differences between the responses of differing groups of kindergarten teachers. In this analysis, p values of < 0.05 were chosen to demonstrate statistically significant differences (Krathwohl, 1997) between the mean scores. Statistically significant results, related to the two statements, are presented below in Table 2.

TABLE 2
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SURVEY STATEMENTS

Statement	Compared Groups (Mean) FD (n=43); HD (n=30); HD/FD (n=13)	p value
<i>Statement 1</i> Teaching HD sessions requires a less academically structured program than FD	FD (2.89) HD (3.33) HD/FD (3.47)	.01 .01
<i>Statement 2</i> FD programs have a greater focus on academic learning than HD programs.	FD (2.90) HD/FD (3.47)	.005

All groups of teachers' responses returned mean scores between 2.89 and 3.47 indicating that there were differing levels of disagreement concerning the issue that HD kindergartens require a less academically structured program than FD classes. Further analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the views of teachers who taught FD and those teachers who taught both HD and FD sessions ($p = .01$). Teachers who taught both HD and FD sessions expressed significantly higher levels of disagreement with the statement that teaching HD sessions required a less academically structured program than FD. Statistically significant differences were also revealed between the views of teachers who taught only FD and those teachers who taught only HD ($p = .01$). In this instance, HD teachers expressed significantly higher levels of disagreement with this statement.

When considering the corollary of this statement, that FD programs have a greater focus on academic learning, a statistically significant difference existed between the responses of FD and HD/FD ($p=.005$).

DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY'S RESULTS

Analysis of the results highlights some noteworthy issues regarding the perceptions of teachers, and the differing teaching emphasis employed by kindergarten teachers in relation to certain aspects of the kindergarten curriculum. These issues are associated with the provision of early literacy programs, together with insights into the academic structure employed in different sessions of kindergarten. Therefore, the four year olds in these multi-level classes need careful monitoring.

Early literacy practices in kindergarten classes

Following examination of classroom practices related to teaching early literacy in kindergartens (including use of big books for teaching reading, whole class instruction in letter formation, utilisation of structured literacy programs and employment of a home reading program), some interesting findings were highlighted. Teachers of K/P classes were the highest users of all four of these early literacy practices on a weekly basis. The reason behind this differing provision could be associated with the fact that a more formalised learning program is usually provided for children in Prep, who are twelve months older than the Kinders. K/P teachers could be finding that providing differing educational programs for these two groups of children to be extremely challenging and so include Kinder children with the older Prep children when teaching early literacy experiences. However, it has been stated that a didactic approach to teaching young children is inappropriate and can be detrimental to young children's academic development (Katz, 1999).

Big books for teaching reading

All kindergarten teachers in this study were regular users of big books for the teaching of reading, with 100% of FD/HD teachers and K/P teachers using these each week. It could be contended that the high frequency with which big books were used by all kindergarten teachers could be seen as an advantage for young learners, especially if this involved enjoyable, meaningful experiences with quality literature, as reading of big books to young children is an instructional practice which is suited to the four and five year old children (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). This practice leads to young readers "developing positive attitudes towards and enjoyment in reading, strengthening cognitive development and instilling a sense of story structure and organisation" (Beaty & Pratt, 2003, p. 282). However, if the focus of these experiences was to solely teach the mechanics of early reading, then it could be argued that this would be unsuitable for the majority of four year olds, for as Munsil (1998, p.3) observes "...a child's natural disposition to learn can be damaged ... by beginning institutionalised learning at too young an age".

Home reading programs

Similarly, the weekly use of home reading programs being undertaken by teachers in 73% of K/P and 70% of FD classes may be taken as a positive aspect in introducing the young learner to suitable texts to share with others at home. As Tracey (2000, p.47) comments "the connections that are established between students' home and school environments can dramatically affect their literacy learning". Therefore, it is suggested that if this is the case 46% of children in both groups of HD/FD teachers' classes are not being exposed to this important early literacy experience and could in fact be disadvantaged in commencing their literacy journey in reading. However, the success of the home reading program depends upon a number of factors, which include the importance of exchanging information between home and kindergarten regarding children's emergent literacy needs, the selection of appropriate texts to suit the child's needs and interests, and the competence of parents in using these texts effectively in the home setting (Beaty & Pratt, 2003, p.262). Although K/P

and FD attendees could be seen as gaining an educational advantage by the regular use of a home reading program, when compared to their peers in HD/FD teachers' classes, it is the quality of the experience that counts. As Seefeldt & Wasik (2003, p.202) point out "the literacy experiences for four-and-five-year-olds set a critical foundation for future literacy development" and must therefore be positive ones for all learners.

Whole group instruction in handwriting

When the practice of teaching whole group handwriting with a focus on weekly instruction in letter formation was investigated, it was found that K/P teachers (73%) were the highest users, and HD teachers (22%) were the lowest. Little difference was found between all groups (other than K/Ps) when consideration was given to those teachers who never used formalised whole group handwriting instruction in their kindergarten. The use of whole group didactic instruction in a kindergarten for four and five year olds is inappropriate and as Beaty & Pratt (2003, p.198) point out "it is not up to us (teachers) to teach the writing process formally to preschool children (younger than five years of age), or to push them forward in their progression". Therefore, it is apparent that the Kinders in K/P classes are receiving formalised instruction in letter formation more suited to older learners.

Structured literacy programs

In a similar vein there were 30% of children in K/P classes who were also receiving instruction in commercially produced literacy programs, designed to teach young children the alphabet. Beaty and Pratt (2003) observe that teaching children the alphabet has been seen by some writers as the best predictor of success in early reading, but those opposing this position conversely believe that this practice is inappropriate. The use of commercialised materials currently being undertaken in some Tasmanian kindergartens could be fraught with problems. As Beaty and Pratt (2003, p, 206) observe teachers of four and five year old children have the most important task of teaching "phonemic awareness ... the precursor to understanding letter sounds in words...(however) ... *phonemic awareness is not phonics*". Further, many of these programs involve the use of worksheet type activities; the suitability of these is discussed further in the following section.

Photocopied worksheets

Comparison of the use of these sheets by HD/FD teachers (with both of their groups) and the use by individual HD and FD teachers provides interesting information. For full-day sessions, only 31% of HD teachers used sheets weekly (with 41% never using them), whilst 92% of HD/FD teachers use sheets with their half-day students on a weekly basis. Similarly, only 47% of FD teachers made weekly use of sheets, with 84% of HD/FD teachers utilising photocopied sheets with their FD students on a weekly basis, whilst 91% of K/P teachers used these on a weekly basis. The results from the HD/FD teachers are somewhat puzzling with these teachers being the highest providers of photocopied worksheets. The reason behind this practice may well lie in the pressure under which these teachers work, dealing with 50 young children each week, leaving little time to create and provide more practically based learning experiences in their classes.

Following the analysis of these response frequency results, further insights were sought with this issue becoming the focus of one of the interview questions in the focus group interviews, when teachers were asked:

"It would appear from the survey results that many Kinder teachers use worksheet-based learning experiences within their classroom. How do you feel about this?". One teacher commented "...it all goes back to the teachers' knowledge ... if you've got that background of what kindergarten really is about, you don't resort to those things (such as worksheets)".

The following dialogue, from another group discussion, also adds to understanding of the use of worksheets in kindergartens.

“Worksheets – it would depend on what kind of worksheets. I mean there’s some really good ones. But I mean if you’ve got a little person who’s only just making marks on the paper...and you’re asking them to do something like colouring in or going over letters...”

“When they can’t even hold their pencil properly”

“Yes! I agree! That’s just it!”

Similar points of view are provided by Beaty & Pratt (2003, p. 199) and they refer to earlier work by Schrader and Hoffman (1987) who state that teachers “impose skill-oriented expectations and tasks on these youngsters – copying and tracing standard adult print”. Further, they indicate that “... such activities not only are stressful for three, four and five year old children, but they do not afford children the opportunity to use their self-constructed knowledge in meaningful ways”(Beaty & Pratt, 2003, p. 199).

During the focus group interviews, teachers discussed the impact that inappropriate learning experiences may be having on young learners.

“I really worry that there are a lot of kids out there who are going to fail, yes, with teachers having to deliver the numbers and the letters to children who are so young and may not be ready for that sort of learning... it’s like play - it’s almost become a dirty word.”

These viewpoints are in strong accordance with the findings of Elicker and Mathur (1997) regarding the inappropriateness of the current practice of downgrading the value of play in the preschool and kindergarten curriculum, in favour of a more structured academic focus. This has probably arisen because kindergarten teachers have been expected to “integrate academics within developmentally appropriate guidelines. (However) this is a very complex task, which could lead to a strong temptation towards a more didactic teaching approach” (Damian, 1997, p.486). The implications of Damian’s quote are most appropriate for the teachers in this study, as seen in the following quote from one interviewee.

“I think that half the unease that people (kindergarten teachers) have is that they’re not providing what they think they should be providing for kids”.

The academic nature of differing kindergarten programs

When the academic nature of HD and FD kindergarten programs were investigated statistically significant differences were found. Results from the statement that HD sessions require a less academically structured program than FD indicated statistically significant differences between FD teachers’ results when compared to HD teachers ($p = < 0.01$) and HD/FD teachers ($p = < 0.01$). Similarly, when the second statement was considered (that FD programs are more academically focussed), FD teachers once again returned a statistically significant difference ($p = < 0.005$) with HD/FD teachers. Following this result, the teachers involved in the study’s focus group interviews were asked to elaborate on the academic nature of kindergarten learning provisions. Teachers made it clear what they believed kindergarten was about.

“We are not preparing them (children) for prep the next year; we’re teaching for now.”

“Yes. I’m not here to prepare children for prep. I’m here to give them education that suits four year olds.”

Further, they added that the academic expectations being pushed by school authorities and parents fail to address the needs of young children in many cases.

“I’ve found that it is boys who aren’t ready for that, you know, some of the structure that you bring into kinder, like sitting still to listen to instructions, or for a story, or lining up to go to the library. They’re just not ready to do that when they’re young.”

“Sometimes they are just not ready for half-days let alone full-days.”

These comments are clear examples of the pressures which kindergarten teachers were under and Beaty & Pratt (2003, p. 278) observe that “there appears to be an emerging dichotomy in what kindergarten is supposed to be and do”. Further, these authors cite the work of Graue (2001) and comment that “kindergarten is increasingly becoming a place that emphasises the transition and preparation between preschool and elementary school” (Beaty & Pratt, 2003, p. 278).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion it would appear that kindergarten teachers in Tasmania are confused as to whether kindergarten teachers are currently facing a similar focus on the preparation of children for the following year of education, during their year in kindergarten. Similarly, there appears confusion as to whether kindergarten is an appropriate forum for commencement of formalised academic pursuits. Nevertheless, this study indicates that there is a strong move by some teachers to provide more academic emphasis within their kindergarten curriculum. These findings included:

- ◆ Teachers in K/P classes were providing a structured and formalised approach to early literacy practices for the children in their classes, being the highest recipients of home reading programs, structured literacy approaches and whole group handwriting sessions on a weekly basis, when compared to other groups of kindergarten children. It is evident that K/P children were being offered a more formalised program than their peers and as discussed earlier in this paper this could be advantageous or detrimental for the young learner, depending upon the manner in which this provision is being undertaken.
- ◆ Children in K/P and in HD and FD sessions (in HD/FD teachers’ classes) were provided with the highest number of worksheets each week when compared to other kindergarten groups. The results associated with HD/FD teachers’ classes are interesting and may indicate that these teachers are utilising photocopied worksheets more frequently to alleviate the pressure of delivering two differing length programs each week to fifty plus kindergarten children.

Conversely, a less academically structured approach appeared to be undertaken in the following classes.

- ◆ Children in HD teachers’ classes never used photocopied worksheets and structured literacy programs, in contrast to the higher uptake by other groups. This suggests that a less structured, more play-based approach is being undertaken in these classes.
- ◆ HD/FD teachers had the highest non-usage of home reading programs with both their FD and HD sessions, possibly indicating that these teachers may not have the time to undertake such a program on a regular basis within their class.

The statistical results from the teachers in this study indicate that children in FD sessions do not require a more academically focussed program than HD sessions. Nevertheless, in reality there are clear differences between the kind of program being offered in differing types of kindergartens in Tasmania, as well as between the perceptions of kindergarten teachers who only teach half-day **or** full-day sessions to those teachers who teach **both half and** full-day sessions each week. Deeper examination of the educational purposes of kindergarten in Tasmania would seem appropriate to inform the practices being undertaken. The publication this year of support materials for the state-based curriculum, Essential Learnings Frameworks 1 and 2 (2002 and 2003) covering the education of children from birth onwards, together with more in-depth research, may provide direction in this important area of kindergarten teaching.

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