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School entrance readiness and its effect on student performance

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School entrance readiness and its effect on student performance

Abstract

"All children in America will start school ready to learn" (Willis, 1992). While this goal sounds laudible, it has evoked mixed feelings from the leaders in the field of early childhood education. Since the 16th century, parents, educators and school districts have been plagued with the question of how to determine a child's readiness for entrance into formal schooling (Friesen, 1984). If a child is delayed from formal schooling, the result is loss of valuable learning time to which the child is entitled according to the state's school entrance age law. On the other hand, if a child is enrolled prematurely, he/she may struggle behind the achievements of others throughout the school years. This is the child that might eventually be retained or might drop out of school (Friesen, 1984). The question of when to start a child's school experience is a dilemma that needs to be considered carefully because the child's chance for a good start is at stake. The Brooklyn-Guernsey-4 Malcom School District allows children to enter formal schooling if their chronological age is five, on or before September 15th. Informal and formal testing is administered by the kindergarten teachers prior to the start of the child's school career. The educators in the school district may make recommendations based on test results to delay enrollment; this allows the child more time to mature. It is the parents' legal right to start their child at the age of five regardless of test results and the Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District's recommendations. There is, however, criteria established that can be used to guide parents, educators and school districts in determining if a child is ready for entrance into formal schooling (Ames, 1986).

**SCHOOL ENTRANCE READINESS
AND ITS EFFECT ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE**

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

M. Susie Ford Brau

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School Entrance Readiness And its Effect on Student Performance

"All children in America will start school ready to learn" (Willis, 1992). While this goal sounds laudible, it has evoked mixed feelings from the leaders in the field of early childhood education. Since the 16th century, parents, educators and school districts have been plagued with the question of how to determine a child's readiness for entrance into formal schooling (Friesen, 1984). If a child is delayed from formal schooling, the result is loss of valuable learning time to which the child is entitled according to the state's school entrance age law. On the other hand, if a child is enrolled prematurely, he/she may struggle behind the achievements of others throughout the school years. This is the child that might eventually be retained or might drop out of school (Friesen, 1984).

The question of when to start a child's school experience is a dilemma that needs to be considered carefully because the child's chance for a good start is at stake. The Brooklyn-Guernsey-

Malcom School District allows children to enter formal schooling if their chronological age is five, on or before September 15th. Informal and formal testing is administered by the kindergarten teachers prior to the start of the child's school career. The educators in the school district may make recommendations based on test results to delay enrollment; this allows the child more time to mature. It is the parents' legal right to start their child at the age of five regardless of test results and the Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District's recommendations. There is, however, criteria established that can be used to guide parents, educators and school districts in determining if a child is ready for entrance into formal schooling (Ames, 1986).

Definitions

Readiness is a broad term with multiple aspects. In this paper the term will be defined as; the characteristics that enable a child to do well in school. The three domains in which these readiness characteristics fall are: the physical, the affective, and the cognitive domains (Hammond, 1986).

The physical readiness domain includes the areas of health,

chronological age and motor development. A child that exhibits good overall health is well rested and fed, properly immunized, alert, and possesses enough stamina to endure a normal day of activities (Hammond, 1986). Chronological age is the exact age of the child. Currently, 30 states require that the child reach the chronological age of five, usually by September or October, before entering school (Freeman, 1990). Large and small motor development consists of the ability to run, jump and climb, to be able to use puzzles, string beads and paint (Smyser, 1990).

The affective readiness domain includes social and emotional skills. A socially and emotionally ready child can participate fully in classroom activities by taking turns and following directions. He/she can work alone and in groups and is developing friendships (Hammond, 1986).

As children mature, they will improve in their ability to handle problems that deal with emotional stress. For example, a mature child will be persistent when trying to accomplish a frustrating task; he/she does not lash out in anger. This is extremely important in difficult situations, especially within

academic and social settings (Friesen, 1984).

The cognitive domain of readiness also contributes to a child's developmental age. In this paper, developmental age refers to the age at which the child is currently functioning. A child that displays a developmentally appropriate age for school is cognitively able to listen, cooperate and communicate effectively by expressing thoughts, feelings and experiences (Willis, 1992).

Purpose of the study

Studying the criteria related to school entrance readiness is an important area of educational research. Elementary educators at the Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District are frequently asked by parents for a professional opinion to guide them in determining if their child is ready for school at Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom. Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom teachers, therefore, need current information in order to give the best possible advice. The relationship between delayed enrollment, retention and alternative programs and student performance needs, also, to be systematically examined (Willis, 1992).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and synthesize the research findings pertaining to school-entrance readiness and later pupil performance. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What data is currently being used by schools to screen children seeking entrance into formal schooling?
2. How well does chronological age indicate a child's readiness for entering school?
3. How does retention or delayed enrollment affect a student's performance during later school years?
4. What alternative educational programs are available to aid in school readiness?

Significance of the Study

There has been a periodic call for a review of the criteria pertaining to school-entrance readiness. This review identifies criteria which can be incorporated into the processes used to determine readiness for formal schooling. It also describes the effects proper placement has upon the student's school

performance in later years. This study will aid parents, educators and school districts in determining when a child is ready to enter formal schooling.

Review of the Literature

This study examines the criteria schools are currently using to determine school-entrance readiness and to ascertain the effects an early or a late entrance makes on a student's performance. This literature review contains four major sections that focus upon the criteria and the effects: readiness screening data, formal readiness data, informal data, and chronological age, developmental age and school readiness.

Readiness Screening Data

Schools throughout the United States are using a variety of data to determine a student's readiness for entrance into formal schooling (Canella and Reiff, 1989). The data can be basically categorized as formal or informal data (Friesen, 1984). Formal data consists of results from standardized tests such as the Gesell School Readiness Test and the Metropolitan Readiness Test

(Schultz, 1989). Informal readiness screening devices range from informal interviews, to checklists of growth information (Engel, 1991).

Formal readiness data

Of the formal standardized readiness tests, the Metropolitan Readiness Test and the Gesell School Readiness Test are still the two most commonly used in the United States (Schultz, 1989).

The Gesell School Readiness Test purports to measure levels of development in order to assess readiness and place children into developmentally appropriate programs (Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989). The Metropolitan Readiness Test measures reading readiness and academic achievement.

Researchers suggest that caution must be taken when using formal standardized tests for determining school-entrance readiness (Meisels, 1989). All tests have a degree of error and the Metropolitan Readiness Test and the Gesell School Readiness Test are no exceptions (Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989). Both standardized tests are noted for being low in validity and reliability when used for the purpose of readiness screening

(Smith and Shepard, 1988). The reliability of a test is a measure to which the scores on the test can be attributed to real differences in individual's abilities rather than to errors in measurement. The validity refers to how accurately it measures what it says it measures. When a test is used to make an important decision about individual children, such as school-entrance readiness, that test must meet the highest standards of reliability and validity (Bredenkamp and Shepard, 1989).

Bredenkamp and Shepard state that the Metropolitan Readiness Test was never intended to be used for specific placement decisions, such as entrance to formal schooling. It was originally designed to guide instructional planning to meet the individual's needs in the regular classroom. When the Metropolitan Readiness Test is used for the purpose for which it was designed, it has acceptable reliability and validity (Bredenkamp and Shepard, 1989). When the Metropolitan Readiness Test is used to screen for readiness, the reliability and validity are lowered and therefore, the child's educational outcome is put at risk from possible incorrect placement decisions (Meisels, 1989).

The Gesell School Readiness Test was developed by the Gesell Institute to aid schools in determining a child's readiness for formal schooling (Freberg, 1991). Many districts favor using the Gesell School Readiness Test because the developers of the test state that the test can identify children who are not ready for school (Steinberg, 1990). One caution when using the Gesell School Readiness Test is that the claims of the testmakers have never been empirically verified and researchers have raised serious doubts about the accuracy of the test (Steinberg, 1990).

Informal readiness data

The informal data is less likely to be utilized to determine school-entrance readiness than is formal standardized test data (Engel, 1991). Because of the increasing demand for accountability from the public for a good education, however, schools are now working to ensure children's success by screening for readiness (Willis, 1992). This demand upon the schools has brought about other ways of assessing readiness besides relying solely on standardized tests; informal testing is becoming more common (Engel, 1991).

Informal data can be obtained from checklists designed by teachers, parents and the local school district. These checklists usually contain information on growth rate, maturation, and social and emotional skills.

Historically, the chronological age has been the most used informal criterion in determining eligibility for school entry (Friesen, 1984). Research shows that growth charts and teething information can serve as partial guidelines to readiness as well (Ames, 1986). Slow teething, slow growth, and smaller overall physical size tend to accompany slow development of behavior; children who display these characteristics need more time to get ready for formal schooling (Ames, 1986). Gender also contributes to the readiness dilemma as kindergarten boys have been found to be as much as six months behind the girls in their development (Friesen, 1984). Children with summer birthdates are often found to be too young for school, especially when compared to children with late fall, winter and early spring birthdates (Ames, 1986). Boys with summer birthdates are doubly prone to be un-ready for school (Friesen, 1984).

Ames has developed a checklist for parents, educators and school districts that can be used as a guide for deciding if a child is ready for school:

1. Will your child be 5 years, 6 months old by September?
2. Can he/she draw and color beyond a simple scribble?
3. Can he/she zip or button a coat?
4. Can he/she tell the left from the right hand?
5. Can he/she cross a residential street safely?
6. Can he/she repeat a series of four numbers without practice?
7. Can he/she repeat an 8 to 10 word sentence if you say it once?
8. Can he/she copy a square?
9. Can he/she tell you what eyes and ears are for?
10. Can he/she tell you what a key is for?

If the child's parent or teacher can answer yes to at least 8 of the 10 questions, the child is assumed to be ready for school (Friesen, 1984).

Other informal data can be obtained by interviewing the

child to discover how effectively he/she can communicate thoughts and feelings. Observing a child at play with age mates is an indicator of the social skills that the child possesses. Parents and educators can note how a child handles a difficult situation; this provides insight into the child's level of maturity.

Chronological Age, Developmental Age, and School Readiness

The research literature which analyzes the relationship between developmental age and chronological age has been examined to determine the value of these measures when making decisions about entrance into formal schooling. Developmental age (DA) refers to a child's behavior based upon a combination of factors such as social and emotional maturity, intellect, physical development and gender. Chronological age (CA) is a child's exact birthdate age.

Thirty states require that a child be chronologically five years old before entering school but do not have a developmental age requirement (Freeman, 1990). Research suggests that chronological age alone is no guarantee of school readiness (Ames, 1986). In fact, one-third of all five year olds (CA) have been found

to be not-ready for school (Hammond, 1986). Instead of relying solely on the chronological age, developmental age should also be considered when determining school readiness (Ames, 1986).

Since developmental age takes into account a variety of factors, none of the factors should be overlooked; any or all of the factors might have an effect on the child's behavior (Ames, 1986). A child that displays physical characteristics such as; smaller in size, lighter in weight, and less gross and small motor coordination will undoubtedly start school at a disadvantage (Benedict, Gerordi, and Coolidge, 1983). Youngsters who are physically not ready, also tire easily, collapse at home after school, perceptualize incorrectly and frequently contract minor illnesses (Hammond, 1986). These children do not have enough stamina and strength to endure a full day of school activities (Hammond, 1986).

Socially and emotionally immature children have very few friends at school. They lash out angrily when they are frustrated or slightly pressured. They relate better to and tend to play with children who are younger. When these children are not exhibiting

anger, they may very well be withdrawn and become loners (Hammond, 1986).

Children who are intellectually unready for formal schooling will show erratic school achievement despite their IQ level. They have one good day and then three poor ones. The good day indicates their potential while the poor ones best represent their usual performance (Hammond, 1986).

Gender, as mentioned earlier, can affect readiness. Boys are developmentally about six months behind girls (May and Welch, 1986). Another factor which affects the developmental level of a child at entrance is the month of birth. Children born in the summer are younger and have had less time to grow and develop and are often unready for school (May and Welch, 1986).

Considering all the factors which can influence developmental age, chronological age should not be the only readiness criteria upon which school districts rely (Freemen, 1990). Raising the chronological age for school entry would not, however, necessarily ensure developmental readiness. This would only create a new younger group of children waiting to begin

school (Elkind, 1986a). Entrance based upon a reasonable chronological age along with an acceptable developmental age would be a more reliable way of assessing school readiness and ensuring a child's school success (Elkind, 1986b).

Retention, Delayed Enrollment and Student Performance

According to the literature, retention and delayed enrollment can have an effect on a student's performance. Retention is the repeating of a previous grade level and delayed enrollment is consciously waiting to start a youngster even though he/she is legally eligible to start school.

Delayed enrollment

Due to increased curriculum demands, parents and educators are currently opting to delay enrollment for many of the children that are not quite ready for school. The children already in school who are experiencing academic difficulties are also often retained in the same grade level. The literature notes that the kindergarten curriculum has changed dramatically in the last 20 years (Bredenkamp and Shepard, 1989). In the past, kindergarten prepared a child for school (first grade) by allowing time to play,

socialize and explore. The kindergarten classrooms of today are very much like the academic environment of the first grades of previous years (Uphoff and Gilmore, 1986). Childhood seems to be disappearing and children are being pressured to grow up and perform academically before their time (Elkind, 1986a).

Several factors have contributed to the changing of kindergarten from a learning-by-play curriculum to a workbook curriculum. Schools have once again been under attack for not adequately preparing children academically (Freeman, 1990). Particularly devastating are reports which compare the academic achievements of American children with those of other countries, such as Japan (Elkind, 1987a). Educators are under pressure for accountability, for effectiveness, and most of all for improving the academic performance of the children in our schools. A common response to these measures is the pushing of academics such as reading and mathematics, into lower grade levels; kindergarteners are now being asked to learn academic work previously reserved for grade one (Elkind, 1987a).

Now that kindergarten for five-year-olds has become

virtually universal in the nation's schools, the demand is growing to make formal instruction available to all four-year-olds (Elkind, 1987a). The universal availability of kindergarten programs has put pressure on kindergarten teachers to teach skills and use materials that have conventionally been introduced in the first grades. This, it is thought, enables entering first graders to be better prepared to reach the goals that have been prescribed for them (Charlesworth, 1989).

Parents are also contributing to the academic pressures of kindergarten by wanting their children to bring home a stack of papers to show that they are learning. Parents want hard proof that the child has learned something, especially if the parent has taught the child to read or write at home (Elkind, 1987a). This pressure from society has added greatly to the increase in movement of academic curriculum into kindergarten (Freeman, 1990). What was once kindergarten, is now more like a first grade and preschool is more like the traditional kindergarten (Elkind, 1987a).

This writer has seen only one out of twenty-one males from

the Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District with late birthdays actually start school at the chronological age of five and succeed without any difficulties. The majority of males who started at the chronological age of five with late birthdays have experienced extreme difficulties with school because they are not developmentally ready . Many of these students were staffed into a special education program for the rest of their school career. This stigma discouraged them from post-high school education of any kind. Two of the known males dropped out of school completely.

Research indicates that delayed enrollment is an option that parents might consider when they feel that their child is not ready for school (Elkind, 1987a). Giving the child the gift of time to grow and get ready on his/her own makes delayed enrollment a feasible option (Hammond, 1986). Other researchers argue that when parents voluntarily hold their children out of school to ensure that they are older and more ready for academics, the parents are only adding to the escalating curriculum problem (Bredenkamp and Shepard, 1989). The literature suggests that

schools should meet the needs of the individual, instead of the individual meeting the needs of the school by delaying enrollment (Charlesworth, 1989).

Retention

Probably no single decision an educator or parent makes is more significant in the life of an individual student than that of retention. The repetition of a grade and the resulting addition of a year to the school experience has an impact on the student for the remainder of his/her life (Bucko, 1986). Many educators and parents, however, believe that grade retention is an effective solution for problems of academic failure and social immaturity even though repeating a grade has little research to support it (Shepard and Smith, 1987). The overall retention rate in the United States Schools is between 15 and 19 percent (Nason, 1991).

Uphoff and Gilmore support grade retention when it is used under certain conditions. The best candidates to benefit from retention are young primary students who; have normal intelligence, are not opposed to being retained, have made some academic progress during the year and are emotionally well-

adjusted (Overman, 1986). These students also have parents who accept the retention decision with a positive and supportive attitude, and the parents are willing to work with the child at home (Bucko, 1986).

Retention has also been found to be successful when utilized with an individualized remedial program for the student (Nason, 1991). A child that has already experienced academic failure should not be recycled through the same program that was inappropriate for him/her the first time. Retention will more likely be successful when the academic program is designed individually to fit the child's needs and is implemented with different teaching techniques (Overman, 1986). Remediation should not actually be in the material taught, but in the type of attention that the student receives (Peterson, 1989). Teachers that have retained students in the classroom need to be positive and encouraging (Schultz, 1989).

On the other hand, a large body of literature on grade retention is almost uniformly negative despite the popular belief that repeating a grade is an effective remedy (Shepard and Smith,

1990). Retention does not produce long lasting academic gains, but rather increases the likelihood that the student will become a high school dropout (Nason, 1991). Shepard and Smith report that when a student repeats a grade, the probability of him or her later dropping out increases by 20 to 40 percent.

Retention is also emotionally damaging to the child's self-concept. Holmes found that students who have been retained do less well in the areas of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcomes and attendance. These children are socially stigmatized and experience rejection by classmates more often than if not retained (Nason, 1991). Some children who have been retained view retention as a form of academic punishment instead of as a means of helping them achieve academic success (Overman, 1986). The stress caused by retention is very great. The research suggests that the only two life events more stressful than being retained are going blind or losing a parent (Shepard and Smith, 1990).

No academic advantages have been found to be connected to the practice of retaining a child (Shepard and Smith, 1987).

Children who have been retained actually perform more poorly on the average when they do go on to the next grade than if they had been promoted without repeating a grade (Doyle, 1989). These children do not actually ever "catch up" by having an extra year in the same grade (Nason, 1991). The research is clear; promoting a child with remediation has been more academically successful than retaining a child in the same grade (Shepard and Smith, 1990).

Retention has also been found to be costly to school districts (Shepard and Smith, 1990). The cost to school a child for an extra year in terms of time, effort and financial outlay is substantial. Shepard and Smith report that it would be more efficient to promote the student with an aide for individualized instruction than having the child repeat the grade. This would not only save the school district money, but the child would benefit academically, as well (Shepard and Smith, 1990).

Alternative Educational Programs and School Entrance Readiness

There are a variety of alternative educational programs available to foster school-entrance readiness. Raising the

entrance age, delaying enrollment, grade retention and changing back the curriculum have already been mentioned in this paper.

Other alternative programs are; transitional classes (pre-kindergarten and junior first grade), non-graded schools, multi-age groupings, individualized instruction, smaller class sizes and at-risk programs (Charlesworth, 1989).

Transitional classes

Transitional classes are half-step classes between either kindergarten or first grade. Pre-kindergarten is a year-long alternative program for children of legal school age who are not developmentally ready for kindergarten, either socially, intellectually, emotionally or physically (Galloway, 1986).

Junior first grade is also a year-long class which prepares children who have completed kindergarten but are not ready for first grade.

These classes are designed to prevent early failure by allowing the children extra time to prepare for the next grade level (Jennings, Burge and Sitek, 1987). The pupil/teacher ratio in the transitional classes is kept lower than in the regular classes.

The curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the children by incorporating a developmentally appropriate program instead of a remedial program (Galloway, 1986). Children are helped instead of letting them fall farther behind in the regular classroom (Leinhardt, 1980). The research evidence gathered so far shows that the transitional classes are providing students with an opportunity to move forward at a rate which allows them to be successful. Altering the pace of expectations allows the students to maintain a more positive attitude toward school and learning (Jennings, Burge and Sitek, 1987).

Data collected on student's attitudes and performances suggest that transitional classes are still a form of retention (Shepard and Smith, 1990). Transitional classes remove the children from the majority of other age-mates; this, however, keeps them from being exposed to other children of more advanced abilities, who serve as models for school survival (Leinhardt, 1980). Transition rooms also add extra years to their school career, cost the school district extra money, label the children and set them on the bottom track for the rest of their school years

(Leinhardt, 1980). As mentioned earlier in this paper, research does not support the "catch up" theory that transition rooms and retention are supposed to achieve (Nason, 1991).

Non-graded schools

A non-graded school does not use the traditional grade divisions. Children enter school as usual at the chronological age mandated by state law no matter what their developmental age is and progress through the stages at their own pace. There is no longer retention; each year the children pick up where they left off with their studies the previous year (Charlesworth, 1989). Progress is reported in terms of tasks completed and the manner of learning, not by grades or a rating system. A team of teachers generally works with a team of multi-age, heterogeneously grouped students who are regrouped frequently according to the particular task or activity and student needs or interests (Pavan, 1992). The grouping of a non-graded program is essential to the success of the program (Slavin, 1992). Non-graded schools respond to individual differences by adjusting the curriculum, therefore allowing students the time required to learn the

material thoroughly. The program is not just a grouping scheme, but a philosophy that demands the provision of appropriate and rich educational experiences for each child. It does not push the children to learn material at a specific grade/age level whether they are ready or not (Slavin, 1992).

Non-graded programs have been found to have many more positive than negative effects (Slavin, 1992). Pavan (1992) reports that only nine percent of the students in a non-graded program performed lower than students in a graded school program. He also notes that pupils in non-graded schools have a more positive attitude. Boys, low socioeconomic level students and underachievers have been found to benefit from a non-graded program (Pavan, 1992).

Multi-age grouping

Multi-age grouping involves integrating two or more grades according to student needs and interests (Oberlander, 1989). Multi-age grouping can be done daily, weekly, monthly or throughout the whole year. The curriculum is adjusted to meet the needs of the children instead of the children being forced to meet the

curriculum. Children can, therefore, progress at their own rates (Elkind, 1987b). Non-graded programs and multi-age groupings greatly reduce the stress placed on children by allowing them to progress at their own rate (Connell, 1987). In a multi-age classroom, the younger children are learning a higher level of play behaviors, the older children are refining skills they have already learned (Charlesworth, 1989). Students benefit from being together for more than one year; this provides more educational continuity (Charlesworth, 1989).

At-risk program

An at-risk student is one who is in danger of failing to complete his or her education with an adequate level of skills (Slavin and Madden, 1989). At-riskness is a function of what bad things happen to a child, how severe they are, how often they happen and what else happens in the child's immediate environment (Frymier and Gansneder, 1989). Risk factors include low achievement, grade retention, behavior problems, poor attendance, parental divorce, low socioeconomic status, low self-esteem, substance abuse and child abuse. One of the most widely

discussed strategies to prevent a child from being at-risk in recent years has been the provision of public, tax-funded preschool education for four-year-olds, particularly those from disadvantaged homes (Mitchell, 1989). This enables the parents to afford pre-school and also enables the children to be more ready for formal schooling, thus reducing their chances of becoming at-risk (Zigler, 1986). Another possible preventative measure that could be taken is establishment of mandatory full-day developmentally appropriate, high quality kindergarten programs in all public schools (Drew, 1990). This would not only help to produce positive effects on first grade readiness and performance, but it would help to produce academic advantages for later grades (Slavin and Madden, 1989).

The At-Risk Program in the schools is a governmentally-funded program that helps students who are identified as at-risk. These students can be helped by using pull-out programs such as Chapter One or Resource; both are a type of remedial program where a teacher works individually with a student or with a small group of students (Slavin and Madden, 1989). At-risk students can

also receive individual instruction from an at-risk teacher (Cuban, 1989). Classroom teachers can help an at-risk student by adjusting the curriculum and monitoring student work more closely (Mantzicopoulos and Morrison, 1990).

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to analyze and synthesize the research literature regarding school-entrance readiness. The four research questions that were posed focus on school-entrance readiness and its relationship to student school performance:

1. What data is currently being used by schools to screen children seeking entrance into formal schooling?
2. How well does chronological age indicate a child's readiness for entering school?
3. How does retention or delayed enrollment affect a student's performance during later school years?
4. What alternative educational programs are available to aid in school readiness?

Summary

The literature describes two types of data determining a child's readiness for entry into formal schooling: formal and informal (Friesen, 1984). Formal data consists of standardized tests such as the Metropolitan Readiness Test and the Gesell School Readiness Test (Schultz, 1989). Additional data can be gathered informally from checklists designed by teachers and parents (Ames, 1986).

Developmental age should be the determiner of when a child should begin school instead of the child's chronological age (Ames, 1986). A child might be the legal chronological age to begin school, but his/her developmental age may be very low, therefore, he/she is not ready for school (Hammond, 1986). Also, if a child is not ready either socially, emotionally, intellectually or physically, he/she will start school at a disadvantage (Hammond, 1986). Boys and children with summer birthdays will be the youngest, and often not ready, to start school (May and Welch, 1986). Research findings clearly indicate that if a child starts school developmentally unready, he/she will always be behind no

matter what his/her chronological age is (Freeman, 1990).

The literature notes that retention can have an effect on student performance. Children who have been retained do not perform better because of it, instead, they actually lose self-esteem, interest in school, and often drop out of school (Shepard and Smith, 1990) (Nason, 1991).

Some research findings support retention; retention can be beneficial if it is used carefully with remediation (Uphoff and Gilmore, 1986). The retained child should have normal intelligence, support from teachers and parents, a completely different curriculum, an adequate amount of individual help and be in the early primary years of school (Overman, 1986).

Delayed enrollment does not appear to have this same negative effect on a child. Writers that do support delayed enrollment note that when children are given extra time to grow and develop, they are found to be more successful when they do begin school (Elkind, 1987a). The literature notes that delayed enrollment has become more essential because of the increased demands of the curriculum over the past years (Elkind, 1987a).

Other researchers do not support delaying enrollment.

Children should, they say, begin school when they are of legal age and the school should adjust to meet the needs of the child (Charlesworth, 1989) (Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989).

Transition rooms, non-graded schools, multi-age grouping and at-risk programs are alternative programs designed to aid students with academic success (Pavan, 1992). Transition rooms reduce stress and allow for extra time to develop the necessary academic skills needed before advancing to the next grade level (Slavin, 1992). Non-graded schools and multi-age groupings do not use grade divisions but group students according to ability, interests, or the activity (Pavan, 1992). Students can, therefore, proceed at their own pace without the pressure and stress that is often found in graded schools (Slavin, 1992). No negative effects were found in the literature. At-risk programs are for the students who are identified as potentially at-risk of completing school or not possessing the skills required to complete school work at a passing level (Slavin and Madden, 1989). These programs are designed to help the students succeed by working on

the skills that they are lacking (Slavin and Madden, 1989).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Formal and informal readiness data

Formal test data should not be used as the determiner of readiness for formal schooling. Instead, the standardized tests results should only be used to place a child appropriately when he/she is currently struggling in school, in an appropriate program for remedial help, Chapter One, or Resource Programs. Informal data that consists of growth information, gender, and birth month should be the real determiner of school-entrance readiness.

Other informal data helpful in determining readiness for school-entrance can be obtained by having the child spend at least one day at school before the following entry year. The Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District has a policy that requires all entering kindergarten students to attend a full day of kindergarten in May before officially entering in the fall. This day of regularly scheduled school activities should be carefully analyzed by the parents and teachers in order that the student's ability to function effectively in a setting with other age-mates is carefully

observed and studied. The parents should then be allowed to make the decision to start their child or to delay their child a year. Most parents follow the advice of the educators in the school system. The few parents that do not choose to delay their un-ready child do so mostly because of an extra year of child-care costs. They should be advised that these children are likely candidates for a remedial program or at risk of being retained later in their school years.

Chronological age, developmental age, and school readiness

Research findings support this writer's personal experiences; a child who is born in the late spring or summer months immediately before the age-entrance cut-off date should not start school that year, especially if that child is a male. This is a child that is not at a developmentally appropriate age and should be delayed until his/her sixth chronological birthday.

Retention, delayed enrollment and student performance

The Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District (Administration) does not recommend retention of a student, but does encourage delayed enrollment at the recommendation of the

kindergarten teachers. If a student experiences difficulties while enrolled in the Brooklyn-Guernsey-Malcom School District, he/she is usually placed in a remedial program, tutored or allowed to struggle through another grade level rather than being retained. This writer recommends that if a child shows the slightest signs of not being ready for school that the child's entrance be delayed. An extra year at home would allow the child to be able to play and grow without undue stress being placed upon him/her. This writer believes that a child can be retained in the lower primary grades and succeed without lasting harm if the retention is handled properly. Therefore, a child that is currently in school and is struggling should not be allowed to go to the next grade level and face more insurmountable roadblocks to learning.

The literature on this topic overwhelmingly supports the idea that the school districts should adjust to the child instead of the child adjusting to the school through delayed enrollment or retention. While this sounds wonderful, the reality is that school district funds are always in jeopardy. Because of the money crunch, class sizes are increasing from 15 to 25 or 30 students

per teacher instead of getting smaller for more one-on-one help and staff is being reduced instead of added. If a child starts school not totally ready, the school can not adjust to meet the child's needs because of the budget not allowing the school to do so. The quality of education is at a risk of becoming lower and a child entering school who is not ready is not likely to succeed. Therefore, a school's first and most common action ought to be the encouragement of delayed entrance.

Alternative educational programs and school entrance readiness

Because of the finance problems that schools are facing, many alternative programs are at risk. What was once a secure Chapter One (Title One) program is being reduced in the state of Iowa due to cutbacks in funding. This program gives students extra help in mathematics and reading. Without the Chapter One Program, many students that need additional help will no longer be able to receive the extra help they need and will be left to survive on their own in the classroom. Chapter One Programs enable students to avoid retention because of the additional help the

students receive.

Alternative programs such as junior first grade and pre-kindergarten classes are actually another form of retention. These classes are steps between regular grade levels but are glossed over to help the students prepare for the next grade. The pre-kindergarten class may be successful because it is an alternative for those parents who cannot afford another year of childcare. In this case, pre-kindergarten might resemble a preschool with the exception that it is publicly funded.

This writer suggests that school districts provide publicly funded preschools (pre-kindergartens) for all children. This would enable children to be better prepared for formal schooling and would enable parents to afford a quality preschool. The school districts need to do their best to keep the alternative programs such as Chapter One and Resource; these programs provide valuable help to students who otherwise would not receive additional help.

Determining the most correct time for starting a child's school career is one of the most important decisions parents and

educators make; it affects the child throughout his/her school career. This is a highly significant decision and should be made with the most up-to-date and available information possible to ensure a child's happiness and success in school.

Implications for further research

At this point, there is not a clear, objectively determined criteria for determining when a child is ready to start formal schooling. The literature mentions several ways to determine a child's readiness for formal schooling; informally gathered evidence seems to be the best. The literature also mentioned the possible effects upon the child and school performance if the child enters school before he/she is ready.

The area of readiness and school-entrance age deserves continued inquiry. More specific and detailed guidelines are needed when determining readiness. Additional data regarding the effectiveness of alternative educational programs and school performance should be sought; it would benefit many educators and parents. It might help districts determine cost effectiveness of the programs they are currently offering.

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