An Investigation of What Parents of Kindergarten Children Would do with and for Their Children Before Entering Kindergarten

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AN INVESTIGATION OF WHAT PARENTS OF KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN WOULD DO WITH AND FOR THEIR CHILD BEFORE ENTERING KINDERGARTEN

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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I would like to thank my wonderful husband Vince, and my three beautiful children, Allison, Nathan, and Joshua, for helping me complete this Master's degree. Without all of your love and support I would not have been able to complete it. I love you all very much.

Praise the Lord, I am DONE!!!!
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate what parents of kindergarten children would do with or for their children before entering kindergarten, given no restraints on time, money and opportunity.

Five hundred questionnaires were sent out to parents of kindergarten children in suburban, rural, inner city, and urban school districts. The data were compared and categorized. Two bar graphs were made to show the results. The results of this study suggest that parents of kindergarten children have similar views on what a child should know and experience before entering kindergarten, with the emphasis being on academics and socialization.
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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

Need for the study

Research has shown that children whose parents are involved in school and school work have less behavior problems, increased achievement and lower dropout rates (Plevyak & Heaston, 2001). Research has also shown that actively involved parents have children who succeed more readily. However, I wonder if parents know what actively involved means. Schools are constantly telling parents that they need to be actively involved in their child’s school, but sitting on the PTA doesn’t make a child a better learner. Since parents are a child’s first teacher in life it makes sense to ask them what they view as essential for their child before he/she enters kindergarten.

Parents play an important part in their child’s development. They are the prime model for their children learning to speak and teaching them shapes and colors. They guide their children in the use of good manners and social skills. However, once a child reaches five years of age parents put him/her in school and seem to back off the academics. They rely heavily on the school to see the progress of their child. Schools foster this by not giving the parents the tools and encouragement they need to keep the learning going at home. Both the schools and parents need to change. Joyce Epstein, a professor at John Hopkins
University, has found that parental involvement in a child's education can be one of the strongest predictors of a child's academic success (2001). Many parents volunteer to be on committees and run those committees at their child's school. However, Epstein notes that "much more fruitful are the connections parents make with their children at home, dissecting what happened in class that day or puzzling over an assignment together" (2001, p. 81).

We know that parent involvement is crucial to a child's success. The U.S. Department of Education formed the Partnership for Parental Involvement in Education (PFIE), which operates on the premise that "Students perform better academically, have fewer discipline problems and become more well-rounded adults when their parents become actively involved in their schools." (Fry, 2001, p. 304). The mission of the PFIE is to educate school administrators, teachers, and parents. If all parties work together the child will benefit. Parents often do not know what their role is or how to help. "Most parents are in fact interested in getting their child the best education they can have, no matter what stratum of society they're in" (Fuller, cited in Fry, 2001, p. 308).

Being an actively involved parent begins at home when the child is young and continues throughout his/her development. The ways parents may be involved change as the child grows and becomes more independent, but such involvement continues to be equally important to his/her success. More extensive parent and family involvement experiences are needed in this time of change in
education. Swick states that there are four thematic areas that provide a framework for this.

1) clarification of the ways families can contribute; 2) recognition of the expertise that families provide; 3) exploration of strategies that offer families meaningful involvement; and 4) the development of ways to fully involve families in the preparation of education professionals (1997, p. 265).

As an educator today in a time when families are busier than they ever have been, one parent families are very common, and babysitters and daycare centers are with our children more than parents, I am concerned that parents have come to a place where they are allowing the school system solely to provide the academics for their child. Since parents are the child's first teacher it seems obvious that what they view as essential experiences for their child before school begins would be beneficial as well as crucial.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what parents of kindergarten children would do with and for their children before entering kindergarten, given no restraints on time, money, and opportunity.
Research Question

What do parents of kindergarten children hypothetically value as essential learnings and experiences before entering kindergarten?
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Parental Involvement

Parents play a crucial and vital role in their children’s developmental and academic success. Joyce Epstein, a professor at John Hopkins University, has found that parental involvement in a child’s education can be one of the strongest predictors of a child’s academic success (2001). In a study that Fry conducted, it was found that “87 percent of the kids who earned mostly A’s and B’s said their parents helped them with their schoolwork. Forty-nine percent of children with grades lower than C said their parents didn’t take an interest in what they did at school” (2001, p. 307). Many parents volunteer to be on committees and run those committees at their child’s school. However, Epstein notes that “much more fruitful are the connections parents make with their children at home, dissecting what happened in class that day or puzzling over an assignment together” (2001, p. 81).

It seems obvious that parent involvement helps a child succeed. However, many parents do not know how to be actively involved. They may believe that looking at their child’s homework or making sure that they brush their teeth is playing an active role. For most parents the level of commitment they have to their child’s academic success depends upon their belief in what education is.
One study found that "parents who believed that kindergarten readiness skills were important provided a variety of learning experiences for their child, including formal and informal education at home and in the community" (Bates, Marvinney, Kelly, Dodge, Bennett, & Pettit, p. 694). Many parents consider knowing the names of letters and numbers a prerequisite for entering kindergarten. The emphasis is mainly on the academic abilities of the child rather than the social abilities. When parents were asked how they felt about their child having social skills, one parent answered that it never occurred to her that her son may not know what to do in a social setting. Harrington states that "social skills—listening, taking turns, sharing, following direction—are vital" (2002, p. 81).

According to Knudsen-Lindauer and Harris, parents ranked counting, reading, and writing as being significantly more important than teachers did. Teachers were more likely than parents to encourage the importance of effective communication, appropriate behavior, and enthusiasm toward learning (1989, p. 96). Parents reported that it is "significantly more important to them that their children do well in the alphabet, reading, and numbers than in sports or making friends. They also stated that they "enjoyed working with their children significantly more in these academic areas, especially the alphabet" (Galper, Wigfield, & Seefeldt, p. 902).

Being an actively involved parent begins at home when the child is young and continues throughout his/her development. The ways parents may be involved change as the child grows and becomes more independent, but such
involvement continues to be equally important to his/her success. More extensive parent and family involvement experiences are needed in this time of change in education.

When parents are involved in their child’s school and school work amazing things can happen. Fuller states:

> From looking at over fifty research studies, I know that when parents get involved in school, those schools improve dramatically. Their children are more motivated and better behaved in the classroom, their diverse needs are met more effectively by teachers, and the scores on achievement tests are significantly higher in schools where you have actively involved parents (Fuller. cited in Fry, 2001, p. 309).

Parents who are familiar with their children’s school curriculum will have ideas about how to build upon the school topics by doing lessons at home or taking the opportunity to discuss the subject as it comes up. The best way to know what is going on in the classroom is to be there and see first hand.

When parents are involved in their child’s education and the school they can provide expertise to their children, the other students, the teachers, and administrators. Swick (1997) suggests that parents have at least four areas of expertise that they can contribute to the school. One is the talents that parents have to share. They have leadership, scientific, artistic, and human relations talents to share with the school. This is beneficial to all parties involved. Parents also understand the learner with special needs and may see a need before the teacher can. They can be a model to the students of how to be a responsive and
skilled helper. Parents also have strengths in problem solving, and building consensus. They can be a true asset to the teacher in the classroom. The fourth way that parents provide expertise is by letting the teacher know what is going on at home. If the child is tired or not feeling well, the parent can give insight into why that is and help the teacher know what is going on.

The more experiences a parent can provide for his/her child the better.

Diane Benson Harrington states that:

Children need a broad range of experiences. From such eye-openers as museums to fun activities like combing the seashore for shells, broadening your child's world is a smart move. Helping your child explore her corner of the world will provide her with the chance to learn new words associated with visits to the zoo, forests, lakes, libraries, and so forth (2002, p.82).

Parents need to know that sitting with their child going over the alphabet is important, but so much more important is giving their child experiences that he/she will not get in school.

Epstein notes that "all families struggle with limited time, and they need understandable and useful information about how to help their children at home to become more successful in school" (1988, p. 347). Parents rely heavily on the school to see the progress of their child. Schools foster this by not giving the parents the tools and encouragement they need to keep the learning going at home. Both the schools and parents need to change. The critical link to involving parents is teachers.
Parents and Teachers as Partners

Parents and teachers may view education differently, but both desire the best education for children. Having these two parties work together to ensure learning will have a positive outcome. Parents often do not get involved with the teacher because they are intimidated or feel that they can not be of service. Teachers often do not know how to get parents involved in their classrooms. Many teachers are “afraid that parents will see their mistakes” (Gorham & Nason, 1997, p.23). Baker, Kessler-Sklar, Piotrowski, & Lamb-Parker state that the reason teachers do not know about parents and their desires for their children are “insufficient opportunities for parents and teachers to share information, lack of effective communication skills on the part of parents and teachers, and lack of motivation on the part of parents and teachers in sharing information” (1999, p. 382). Someone and something needs to change. One goal of a recent school reform is to increase the level of specific parent involvement activities, not just at assemblies, but for “schools and homes to form meaningful partnerships” (Epstein, 1997). This means that both parties need to willing to change and learn to better educate the children. This also provides a learning environment for the child that is positive and encouraging.

Many teachers are not aware of how involved a parent desires to be in his/her child’s education because the parent does not communicate with the
teacher. When a teacher is aware of the desired involvement, he/she can provide parents with individualized guidance and understanding to enhance their child’s learning. Many parents are not sure what to do for their child or how to help him/her academically. When teachers and parents are communicating parents can get insight from the teacher. One study investigated two kindergarten teachers who were having a problem at sharing time. It seemed that none of the students had much to share. The teachers tried to get the students involved and motivated, but nothing seemed to work. When the parents were asked to help out, sharing time blossomed and the children were motivated. The teachers stated that “We had to identify what we wanted them (parents) to do, and then ask ourselves, how do we communicate what this means” (Edwards, 1996, p.349)? Once they identified what they wanted parents to do, the parents ran with it.

There are also many parents who do not know that their child’s teacher would welcome help in the classroom. The breakdown of the family structure and changing values has many parents in a place of uncertainty as to how to help their children and be involved in their schooling. Schools can help families by being a support and giving them ways to be involved. “If schools are to communicate effectively with parents, it is essential that parents’ voices be heard” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999, p. 48). Teachers can provide opportunities for parents to communicate with them openly. When a parent gets involved in the school day and with the work that is sent home, he/she gets a good look at what is actually
taking place for the six hours the child is away at school. When parents have firsthand experience with their child’s teacher both the teacher and the parent can help one another. “Staying out of each others’ business leaves the children most vulnerable to physical and psychological danger and parents and teachers most vulnerable to stereotyping and accusation” (Gorham & Nason, 1997, p.26). Being involved with one another makes for a better learning environment for the child, and that is the ultimate goal.

Families help the teacher to know how the child learns and what experiences the child has had. “Families give educators a sense of the realities that children face outside the classroom” (Swick, 1997, p. 265). When teachers and parents communicate, teachers can learn more about parent/family coping, parent-child relationships, parenting strengths and needs, work-family challenges, family means for relating to children’s special needs, and reactions of parents to different situations (Swick, 1997).

There are many things that schools can do to encourage involvement from home. One way to do this is to do lunch with the parents. One school had a Math and Science night and gave away ice cream. Another school gave brown bag lunches to parents while they explained the new curriculum. Another way to involve families is to give parents real power. Many districts have school-improvement teams of parents that help in the hiring, selection of curriculum, and testing in the school. Making house calls is another way that parent involvement
is ensured. A few parents decided that it would be beneficial for the teachers to make house calls on occasion to better understand students and parents. The fourth way to help parents be involved is to hold parents accountable for homework returned, dress codes enforced, and academics up to standards. The final way to help is to give parents talking points. A few schools in Virginia are using internet, email, and voicemail to stay informed. If parents are given a mode to communicate at any hour of the day, they may be more likely to communicate. (Time, 2001).

We are in time when families are busier than they ever have been. One parent families are very common, and babysitters and daycare centers are with our children more than parents. I am concerned that parents have come to a place where they are allowing the school system solely to provide the academics for their child. Since parents are the child’s first teacher it seems obvious that they would want to communicate effectively with their children’s school teachers.
CHAPTER III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate what parents of kindergarten children would do with or for their children before entering kindergarten, given no restraints on time, money and opportunity.

Research Question

What do parents of kindergarten children hypothetically value as essential learnings and experiences before entering kindergarten?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects for this study were parents of kindergarten children from urban, inner city, rural, and suburban school districts in and around Rochester, NY.
**Definition of Terms**

Urban – for this study urban is considered a city school where the majority of the students attending do not receive “free lunch”.

Inner City – for this study inner city is considered a school where the majority of the students attending do receive “free lunch”.

**Materials**

The material used in this study was a parent questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was developed by the researcher with the help of colleagues and parents of elementary school students. It was piloted by eighteen parents of elementary students and five educators. Five hundred questionnaires were sent out and fifty-two were returned.

**Procedures**

The parent questionnaire was distributed to parents of kindergarten children in urban, inner city, rural and suburban school districts in and around Rochester, NY. A letter was attached explaining the reason for the questions (see Appendix B).
Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed qualitatively. Parent responses to the questions were compared and categorized.
CHAPTER IV

Analysis of Data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate what parents of kindergarten children would do with or for their children before entering kindergarten, given no restraints on time, money and opportunity.

Findings

The data were compared and categorized to show the results of the questionnaire. Table 1 shows the results from the question, “What do you think a child should know before he/she enters kindergarten?” Table 2 shows the results from the question, “What do you think a child should experience before he/she enters kindergarten?”
Findings from Table 1

The data formed four categories as seen above. The results show that 85% of parents believe that academics are important for a child to know before entering school, 52% of parents view socialization as important, 44% view motor skills as important, and 17% view love and emotions as important. The results showed that most parents who filled out the questionnaire had similar views on what a child should know before entering kindergarten.
Table 2

Findings from Table 2

The data formed five categories as seen above. Seventy-one percent of parents believe that a child should experience some socialization before entering kindergarten, 42% of parents believe that a child should experience academics before kindergarten begins, 31% of parents think that spending time with the family and showing love is a need, 23% of parents view hands-on activities and experiences as important, and 12% of parents questioned believe that having a child experience some emotional happenings or sufferings would benefit him/her before kindergarten begins. The results from this question also indicated that most parents have similar views and desires for their children.
Interpretations

From the information gathered it seems that most parents of kindergarten children desire similar experiences for their child. Many view academics as the most important thing to know before kindergarten begins. The two tables differ in that when asked the question, “What do you think a child should know before entering kindergarten?” 85% of parents chose academics as what their child should know. However, when asked what a child should experience before entering kindergarten, only 42% of parents thought academics were what a child should experience. It is interesting to note that 71% of parents felt that a child should have experienced some socialization before entering kindergarten; however, only 52% of parents said that a child should have socialization skills before entering kindergarten.

The data were interesting to read since many parents had similar thoughts, but different ways to help a child know and experience things. Some parents felt that the school should be the leader in what the child should know and experience. Others felt very strong that parents are the child’s first teacher and they want the say in what their child knows and experiences. In the end, it is obvious that all of the participants in this study desire to help their child succeed.
CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate what parents of kindergarten children would do with or for their children before entering kindergarten, given no restraints on time, money, and opportunity.

Conclusions

This study surveyed parents of kindergarten children and asked what they viewed as the most important thing for a child to know and experience before entering kindergarten. The findings of this study show that most parents want to help their child succeed. It also shows that most parents have similar views on what a child should know and experience before kindergarten begins. The responses received back were similar in nature. Four categories were formed for the first question and five categories were formed for the second question. It is easy to say that most parents want to see their child succeed, since this was a voluntary questionnaire.
Discussion

The data received back were similar in nature. My interpretation of the results is that when filling out the questionnaire parents thought inside the box. Most talked about academics and socialization as being very important for a child to know and experience. I was surprised that I did not receive any responses that indicated parents thinking outside the box. For instance, I thought that I may get some responses saying that a child should have the opportunity to go to camp or tour Europe.

Four parents responded that they thought a child should just be allowed to be a kid. Two parents responded that preschool does not need to be a pre-requisite for attending kindergarten, however, fifteen parents agree that preschool should be a pre-requisite for attending kindergarten. One parent shared that kindergarten is the most crucial year of school. Another parent thought that kindergarten is not a big deal and that parents do not have to do much to get a child ready for kindergarten.

Others think that if children are loved and nurtured they will have what they need to succeed in school. One parent wrote that he/she feels that a child will succeed if he/she is made to feel “really special.” Another responds by stating, “Children entering kindergarten should come to school with the background of a loving, nurturing home with limits that value education,
especially reading.” Another parent writes, “Lots of love and patience. Too often parents are too busy, too tired or stressed to actively listen to their child’s needs.”

One parent says that a child should have the experience of going to a restaurant. She writes, “Children should go to A REAL RESTAURANT! Not Burger King or McDonald’s.” Another parent wrote about what a child should experience before he/she enters school, “More important than what a child knows or has experienced, he/she needs stamina (physical, emotional, mental) to endure the school day. This stamina is probably only obtained through their past years, i.e., the older he/she is, the better.”

Three parents commented that they thought having a relationship with God was important for their child. One wrote, “No self-esteem classes are needed for the child who knows he/she is loved by God and family.”

Other parents believe that the school is the final authority and parents should back off the academic portion for their children. One father wrote,

Too many parents want to be able to fully control the schools. If the school board would pay staff and teachers properly, and hire people competent enough to do their jobs, then parents should learn to trust their children’s education in the hands of the educators. We should just be able to relay what’s learned in school, and carry it into the home.

It is important to note that five-hundred questionnaires were sent out to school districts and only fifty-two were returned. It is also interesting to note that the questionnaire was sent out to four different demographic areas, suburban,
rural, inner city, and urban. The same numbers of questionnaires were sent out to each of the four demographic area school districts. Out of the fifty-two questionnaires returned to me 14 were from a suburban district, 15 from a rural district, and 13 from an inner city district, and 10 from an urban district.

**Implications for the Classroom**

The findings of this study show that most parents, from all demographic areas, do want to help their children succeed in school. Many parents do not know what is important for their child academically. Schools can help parents guide their children through academics by asking the parents what they view as important and expanding on that. They may feel that knowing their name and colors is the most beneficial before entering kindergarten. Teachers can guide and direct parents on how to help their children get ready for school. When teachers and parents communicate, the educators can help the parent understand that children need many experiences in their lives that they cannot get at school. Teachers can help parents know that the academics will come along as the child is loved, talked to, and given opportunities. Schools could use parents to help get programs started and volunteers needed to help with the academics. If the teacher and the parents have communicated with one another about what is important for the child, the child will succeed. When teachers know what parents view as important they get to know the child in a different way and can use this
information to aid in the academic portion of school. When parents discuss what is important to them with the teacher, they are opening a door for teachers to give input on what could be beneficial for the parent and child to work together on at home.

**Implications for Further Research**

This study gave insight on what parents view as important before their children enter school. Five hundred questionnaires were sent out to urban, suburban, inner city, and rural districts. Only fifty-two questionnaires were received back. It is possible that a different form of questionnaire would have had more parents returning it. Possibly an oral questionnaire or survey would have had a greater response. It would be interesting to compare and contrast what parents of different economic and demographic backgrounds view as important to their child. The findings could be similar in nature to the ones found here or very different. This same question could be asked of parents with children in older grades, as opposed to only kindergarten parents. It would also be interesting to have teachers fill out the questionnaire and compare the answers to the parents answers. This could be done as a district, and questionnaires could be filled out anonymously by some teachers and some parents. The findings could be compared and an informational meeting held for both teachers and parents to see
the findings. It could then be used as a teaching tool for all that are involved. Handbooks could be made up for parents and teachers. The parent handbook could have ways to help a child in each grade level, academically and socially. The teacher handbook could have ideas for how to get parents involved and how to pull the students into the learning process. The communication between teachers and parents needs to be opened wider.
References


When parents drop out: Too many harried moms and dads have been playing hooky, but schools are luring them back. (2001, May 21). *Time, 157,* 80-85.
Appendix A

Parent Questionnaire
Parent Questionnaire

As you are filling this out please keep in mind that there are no constraints on time, money, or opportunity. The sky is the limit! Write down whatever you are thinking.

What do you think a child should know before he/she enters kindergarten?

What do you think a child should experience before he/she enters kindergarten?
Appendix B

Parent Letter
Dear Parents/Guardians,

PLEASE HELP, YOUR INPUT IS NEEDED!!!!
I am looking for parents and guardians of elementary students to help me obtain information about what you think is essential to a child’s learning.

My name is Kristen Anderson and I am currently working on my thesis for a Master’s degree at SUNY Brockport in Reading Education. Your input is beneficial and necessary to complete this project. The schools often tell us what is important, but I want to know what parents view as most important for children to learn and experience before school begins.

If you would be willing to help me obtain this information, please answer the two questions attached to this paper. The questions are similar in nature, however, your answers may be very different.

Please place the questionnaire in the envelope provided and have your child bring it back to school by February 28th. I will collect the questionnaire from your child’s teacher. This is an anonymous questionnaire and will only be used to obtain data for my thesis.

Upon completion, my thesis will be available at the SUNY Brockport library should you wish to view the results.

Thank you in advance for your help.

Sincerely,
Kristen Anderson