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**Academic Pressure and Expectations Impacting Upon the Educational Provision In
Kindergartens:
Investigating the Impact of Teachers' Years of Classroom Experience and Type of Specialisation
and Current School Location**

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Author:

**Dr Margot Boardman
University of Tasmania**



Contact details:

Email: Margot.Boardman@utas.edu.au

Phone: 0363 243735

Fax: 0363 24 3048

Abstract

Renewed interest in the early academic preparation of young children, designed to lead to future success in schooling, has been impacting upon the educational provision for many kindergarten students. Academically focussed curricula are becoming more prevalent in kindergarten settings, resulting in traditional play-based approaches being challenged by some parents and educators. This paper reports on a study, which sets out to ascertain the prevalence of more formalised teaching and learning practices being undertaken in Tasmanian kindergartens with four and five year old children, when the teachers' area of specialisation, years of teaching experience and school location are considered. Eighty six kindergarten teachers from three of the six Tasmanian state school districts participated in the study. Results showed that teachers from isolated school locations and those with limited teaching experience were the teachers utilising the most teacher-directed learning experiences in kindergarten. Conversely, teachers from urban locations who had between sixteen and twenty five years of teaching experience were providing the least formalised learning program for their kindergarten students. It is evident that strong leadership is needed for some groups of teachers in Tasmanian schools if these trends towards formalisation of the kindergarten-teaching program are to be addressed. Establishment of strong collegial support networks would also be beneficial, especially for those less-experienced and isolated teachers, to allow informed debate to be undertaken by all kindergarten teachers on this important issue in young children's learning.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, there has been a renewed interest in the early academic preparation of young children, designed to lead to later school success. Added to this changing academic provision has been the concurrent move from half-day to full-day attendance for children within kindergartens. Some writers (da Costa & Bell, 2001; Gullo, 2000; Cryan, Sheehan, Weichel, & Bandy-Hedden, 1992; Housden & Kam, 1992) have seen this change in attendance as being supportive of the academic preparation of young children. In addition, supporters of full-day kindergarten point to the current research in the neurosciences, which highlights the importance of "a well-planned and well-executed pedagogy" in the first years of a child's life, with full-day kindergartens being seen as raising "the threshold for student achievement" and producing "academically stronger students" (Tantum, 1999, p. 24-26).

However, critics of full-day kindergarten programs contend that these programs "increase the stress of already inappropriate curriculum approaches" (Elicker & Mathur, 1997, p.461), as academically focussed curricula for pre-school children are being "dominated by workbooks and drill and practice of discrete skills" (Katz, 1999, p. 3). Further, Schubert (1997, p. 481) comments that American kindergarten teachers are being "pushed by state standards, school boards, administrators, parents and other forces to become more and more 'academic'

in the classroom". This leads to teachers requiring more time with children and promoting the full-day attendance option for young children.

A comparable situation is currently developing in Tasmania, where similar forces are impacting upon the type and length of kindergarten programs being offered across the state. Parents have been demanding full-days of kindergarten for their children to fit in with their family situations (including parents working, travel issues associated with delivery and collection of half-day children from school, as well as the chronic lack of child-care places for children in Tasmania – see Boardman, 2002). Their demands have been instrumental in the change to full-day kindergarten sessions for their children.

Teachers of young children are also feeling the pressure of academic expectations from education authorities, with mandated assessment of kindergarten children in personal, cognitive, motor and linguistic competencies at the start of their kindergarten year. Subsequent remediation programs are implemented for those children deemed to be 'at risk' of educational failure, prior to re-assessment at the end of their kindergarten year. Further, there has been a statewide focus on explicit teaching in the areas of literacy and numeracy for all children, with many changes in teaching provisions being undertaken with respect to young children's education. These include the use of structured literacy programs, use of worksheets and introduction of formalised whole-group teaching procedures.

When comparing the experiences in the United States of America with those in Tasmania, it is important to note that the local kindergarten children are twelve months younger in age than their American counterparts. Therefore, it is not advisable to make generalisations between Tasmanian and American kindergarten contexts. American research has indicated that full-day kindergartens were providing a more academically focussed approach to learning than half-day kindergartens. Therefore, it was seen as important and desirable to ascertain the prevalence of more formalised teaching and learning procedures and practices being undertaken in Tasmanian kindergartens. The project reported here investigated the teaching practices of different groups of kindergarten teachers, including teachers of full-day and half-day kindergartens, teachers with differing levels of teaching experience, and teachers from differing locations (urban, rural and isolated).

The Design of the Study

This paper reports on one section of a larger study, which was designed to investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions of full-day and half-day kindergarten programs, regarding the beneficial and/or detrimental effects of the attendance modes upon the education of four and five year old children. Postal surveys were sent to all kindergarten teachers (n=104) in three of the six education districts in the Tasmanian state school system. The surveys were designed to collect data concerning the educational practices occurring in both full-day and half-day Tasmanian kindergarten settings. This sample size was considered sufficient to allow generalisations to be made from the study (Gay, 1996). The sample was representative of kindergartens within the state

system, including schools of differing size, type, location and socio-economic status. A high return rate (83%) of completed surveys ensured that a detailed set of information was available for analysis. A scaled tool was used to record the respondents' teaching practices in full-day and half-day Kindergartens. Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently (*weekly, other [occasionally, sometimes], never*) they used a variety of teaching strategies and processes (such as photocopied worksheets, formalised whole class teaching of handwriting and structured literacy programs) within their kindergarten program. This process was seen as providing reliable, valid results as it was based upon empirical data rather the subjective opinions (Burns, 2000) of the respondents. Results from the survey were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to enable systematic and accurate handling of data (Rose & Sullivan, 1996). After entry of these results into the spreadsheet, percentages were calculated to quantify the frequencies with which these teachers undertook the stated practices/procedures in their class. Results were calculated when variables such as the teacher's school location (urban, rural, isolated), years of teaching experience (from less than five years to more than twenty five years of teaching experience) and type of teaching specialisation (early childhood and primary) were considered.

Results of the Study

When results were analysed according to the location of the kindergarten, some differences and similarities were noted and are presented below.

Kindergarten teachers' use of specific teaching processes according to location of kindergarten

Table 1 shows the percentage of teachers, from the three differing school location types, who utilised the various teaching processes/procedures.

Teachers from isolated kindergartens (86%) were the highest users of photocopied worksheets on a weekly basis, with 32% of teachers in urban locations never using these in their classes. The use of big books for the teaching of reading was undertaken at a similar rate across all locations. Teachers in rural kindergartens (54%) were the highest users of whole class handwriting sessions with 86% of teachers in isolated kindergartens never teaching in this manner. Teachers in rural kindergartens (54%) were the highest users of home reading programs, whilst 57% of teachers in isolated kindergartens never used these programs. Structured literacy programs (such as Letterland, THRASS) were used less frequently in urban kindergartens, with 88% of teachers never using these, whereas 33% of teachers in isolated kindergartens used these each week.

Teaching process/ procedure	Frequency	Kindergarten Location		
		% Urban (n=40)	% Rural (n=36)	% Isolated (n=10)
Photocopied worksheets	<i>Weekly</i>	49	73	86
	<i>Occasionally</i>	19	19	-
	<i>Never</i>	32	8	14
Whole-class handwriting	<i>Weekly</i>	31	54	14
	<i>Occasionally</i>	8	3	-
	<i>Never</i>	61	43	86
Structured literacy programs	<i>Weekly</i>	12	28	33
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	3	-
	<i>Never</i>	88	69	67
Big books for teaching reading	<i>Weekly</i>	90	90	100
	<i>Occasionally</i>	4	5	-
	<i>Never</i>	6	5	-
Home reading programs	<i>Weekly</i>	65	73	43
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	3	-
	<i>Never</i>	35	24	57

Table 1: Kindergarten teachers' use of specific teaching processes according to kindergarten location

The use of big books for the specific teaching of reading skills was found to be similar when teachers' years of experience in the classroom were considered. The least experienced teachers (with less than five year's teaching) were the highest users of home reading programs (88% using these each week) and structured literacy programs (38% using these each week). More experienced teachers were the lowest users of whole class instruction in handwriting and structured literacy programs. However, teachers with more than twenty five year's experience were the highest users of photocopied worksheets (74%) on a weekly basis.

Kindergarten teachers' use of specific teaching processes accordingly to their years of teaching experience

Table 2 shows the percentage of teachers who used the various teaching processes/procedures, according to their years of teaching experience.

Teaching process/ procedure	Frequency	Teachers' Years of Teaching Experience			
		% > 25 years (n=17)	% 16-25 years (n=5)	% 5-15 years (n=39)	% < 5 years (n=25)
Photocopied worksheets	<i>Weekly</i>	74	48	61	50
	<i>Occasionally</i>	5	22	17	25
	<i>Never</i>	21	30	22	25
Whole-class handwriting	<i>Weekly</i>	42	24	50	50
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	15	9	13
	<i>Never</i>	58	61	41	37
Structured literacy programs	<i>Weekly</i>	11	15	20	37
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	-	-	-
	<i>Never</i>	89	85	80	63
Big books for teaching reading	<i>Weekly</i>	95	94	87	87
	<i>Occasionally</i>	5	6	4	-
	<i>Never</i>	-	-	9	13
Home reading programs	<i>Weekly</i>	72	60	60	88
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	4	5	-
	<i>Never</i>	28	36	35	12

Table 2: Kindergarten teachers' use of specific teaching processes accordingly to their level of teaching experience

Kindergarten teachers' use of specific teaching processes accordingly to their type of teaching specialisation

Table 3 shows the percentage of teachers who used the various teaching processes/procedures, according to their area of teaching training specialisation.

When the results of teachers' responses were analysed with respect to their area of teaching specialisation (early childhood and primary teaching), it was found that both groups provided relatively similar teaching programs. Primary trained teachers were the highest users of photocopied worksheets and whole class handwriting by between 12% and 15% respectively, when compared to early childhood trained teachers. Early childhood trained teachers were the lowest users of whole class handwriting sessions each week, with 53% never using these in their classroom.

Teaching process/ procedure	Frequency	Teachers' Area of Specialisation	
		% Primary (n=16)	% Early Childhood (n=70)
Photocopied worksheets	<i>Weekly</i>	70	58
	<i>Occasionally</i>	6	18
	<i>Never</i>	24	24
Whole-class handwriting	<i>Weekly</i>	50	35
	<i>Occasionally</i>	20	12
	<i>Never</i>	30	53
Structured literacy programs	<i>Weekly</i>	14	17
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	6
	<i>Never</i>	86	77
Big books for teaching reading	<i>Weekly</i>	100	91
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	7
	<i>Never</i>	-	2
Home reading programs	<i>Weekly</i>	56	63
	<i>Occasionally</i>	-	7
	<i>Never</i>	44	30

Table 3: Kindergarten teachers' use of specific teaching processes accordingly to their area of teaching specialisation

Discussion of Study's Findings

A number of important issues are revealed in this study, with evidence of formalised academic preparation of four and five year old children within Tasmanian kindergartens being highlighted and discussed. For the purpose of this discussion, evidence of academic preparation of children is presented under two main headings: evidence of the prevalence of formalised written tasks and evidence of the prevalence of early reading initiatives in kindergarten settings.

Evidence of the prevalence of formalised written tasks in kindergartens

A number of writers on kindergarten education (including Clark & Kirk, 2000; Rothenberg, 1995) have highlighted the use of worksheets, for the practice of discrete skills (Katz, 1999) in literacy and numeracy, to be inappropriate. Within this study, it is apparent that photocopied worksheets were being used on a regular weekly basis by some groups of kindergarten teachers. Teachers in isolated kindergarten settings (88%) were the highest users of these sheets. The reasons for this result could be related to the isolation of these teachers where opportunities for professional development and collegial support are limited. It is suggested that these teachers could see the easy access to photocopied worksheets as a means of ensuring children are making appropriate progress in academic areas. It should also be mentioned that many of these isolated

schools have small school populations. Therefore, kindergarten teachers could well be responsible for composite class groupings of children and, for ease of classroom management, kindergarten children may be undertaking types of activities similar to those of their peers in Prep and/or Grade 1.

In a similar manner, primary trained teachers (70%) were higher users of photocopied worksheets than their early childhood trained peers. This result could well reflect the more teacher-directed approach to teaching which has been utilised by primary teachers over the past decade, where photocopied worksheets have been central to daily teaching practices in primary grades (Grades 3-6). Furthermore, it is highly likely that the majority of these teachers would not have undertaken in-depth studies in early childhood pedagogy, and the probability that they would have undertaken post-graduate studies in early childhood pedagogy is limited, as this facility is not offered within the local university program. Therefore, these teachers may not have the pedagogical expertise to evaluate the impact that the regular use of photocopied worksheets could be having on the young learner in kindergarten. It must also be queried whether the fact that 58% of early childhood trained teachers were using photocopied worksheets in their kindergarten each week, is indeed appropriate practice. Could it be an example of formalised teaching procedures being undertaken in kindergartens with four and five year old children, even by teachers who possess appropriate teaching qualifications? It is not that worksheets are totally inappropriate for children of this age, but rather it is the regularity of the practice demonstrated in this study's results and the fact that some children may be feeling academically pressured if they do not have the level of cognitive competence to complete such tasks. It must be questioned whether these children, at four and five years of age, are already experiencing feelings of failure within their learning.

It is evident that teachers with more than 25 years of teaching experience were using these photocopied worksheet activities more frequently each week than their peers. Indeed, 74% of these experienced teachers were found to be undertaking this practice on a weekly basis. This result is somewhat puzzling, as it could be expected that experienced teachers would be more able to recognise the limitations of these teaching practices. However, this is not the case and it is suggested that even the most experienced teachers are feeling the increased pressure for children to attain set academic outcomes, and see the use of worksheets as an 'easy' way of achieving this. Less experienced teachers (with 5-15 years' experience) were the other group widely using worksheet-based activities within their kindergartens. Once again, the need for collegial discussion and understanding, regarding the implications of this more formalised teaching provision, is highlighted. Thus in relation to this study, it is apparent that the majority of teachers from isolated locations, and those who were primary trained, as well as those kindergarten teachers with over 25 years' teaching experience were providing their students with regular photocopied learning tasks, which must be cause for concern when the learning provision for the four and five year olds in Tasmanian schools is considered, given the points raised during this section of the discussion.

Evidence of the formalisation of the learning program was further revealed when teachers were asked to indicate whether they taught whole-class handwriting. Eighty five percent of teachers from isolated kindergarten sites never taught handwriting to their students; whilst 54% of teachers in rural kindergartens and 50% of primary trained teachers used whole-group handwriting each week. This level of structure within the learning program of four and five year old children should be cause for concern, with emphasis being placed on activities which require “seat-work” (Rothenberg, 1995), rather than active physical engagement. Furthermore, Beaty and Pratt (2003) indicate that “learning to write is a complex and lengthy process” and children do not “learn this process by being formally taught” (p.196). Thus, it must be queried why such formalised teaching processes are being undertaken with children of this age. Additionally, the process of engaging kindergarten children in whole-group teacher-directed tasks is also seen as inappropriate, since child-initiated, small-group experiences have been found to be advantageous for children of this age (Clark & Kirk, 2000). In conclusion, it must be queried whether the 50% of primary trained teachers and those 54% of teachers from rural kindergarten locations are providing appropriate teaching experiences for kindergarten children in early writing experiences.

The third form of evidence indicating the move towards kindergarten children engaging in structured written tasks was found when teachers were asked to indicate whether they used structured literacy programs (such as Letterland and THRASS), with their four and five year olds. Two groups of teachers who were engaging their students in structured literacy programs were those in isolated schools (with 33% of teachers teaching these programs) and less experienced teachers with fewer than five years teaching experience (with 38% of these teachers utilising these programs). These inexperienced teachers are likely to be highly vulnerable if pressured to undertake such structured programs by the school’s senior staff, as all kindergartens in this study were located in schools with kindergarten to grade 6 (or 10) enrolments. In addition, these novice teachers do not have the experience, or possibly the confidence, to challenge such demands. Indeed, job security is of paramount concern for inexperienced teachers who may well be in temporary positions and it is contended that their desire to accommodate the demands of senior teaching staff are generally followed with limited questioning. Furthermore, newly qualified teachers frequently staff remote schools and problems associated with lack of experience could be compounded if there is no appropriately qualified or experienced support available. The lack of early childhood expertise in leadership, within Tasmanian school settings, could be a fundamental reason why some kindergarten teachers are undertaking inappropriate educational practices. Inexperienced teachers need knowledgeable mentors to support and guide them through their early years of teaching, and this leadership must be provided on a regular basis (Boardman, 1999). It is apparent that formalised written tasks and practices are being undertaken in a number of kindergarten settings, especially in isolated schools and in classes taught by the least experienced teachers within Tasmania. These practices must be challenged for their appropriateness if young learners’ “natural emergence into writing” is the focus of teaching, as Beaty and Pratt (2003, p. 203) acknowledge “it is not the teachers but the children who teach themselves ... letters from the alphabet that they find useful”.

Evidence of the prevalence of early reading initiatives in kindergartens

In this study, a majority of responding kindergarten teachers confirmed that they were using big books as a part of their classroom practice, when teaching students to read. All teachers in isolated locations and all primary trained teachers, as well as 95% of teachers with more than 25 years of teaching experience and 91% of early childhood specialised teachers, were the highest users of big books on a weekly basis. These results could well be seen as highly positive, as books are described as “agents of change, vehicles for introducing concepts and catalysts for activities” (Bieger, 1996, p. 309). This is particularly so if the books are being used to foster a love and enjoyment of reading. However, it must be pointed out that if the big books are being used for didactic teaching of discrete reading skills, then it could also be considered inappropriate. Beatty and Pratt (2003) remark that reading for four and five year old children should be child directed, whilst reading for five to six year olds becomes more teacher directed. However, they add that “kindergarten is increasingly becoming a place that emphasises the transition and preparation” (p.278) between preschool (our local kindergarten) and early childhood school placements. Meyer (2001) asserts that this is occurring for four reasons. These are societal changes, misconceptions about how young children learn, the proliferation of educational texts (which are not necessarily suited to the four year old child), and the lack of appropriately trained teachers. The latter reason does not appear to be of significance in this study’s context as both early childhood and primary trained teachers used big books at a similar rate within their kindergarten classes. However, it is contended that the other reasons are most pertinent for the Tasmanian setting.

The final aspect investigated related to the frequency with which children were taking home simple texts to read. Teachers with the longest teaching experience (more than 25 years) and those with the least experience were the most frequent users of home reading programs. In relation to location of the kindergartens, rural teachers were the most supportive of home reading programs with 73% using these on a weekly basis, whilst 57% of teachers in isolated locations never used these programs. Beatty and Pratt (2003, p. 258) contend that the connections made between the students’ home and the kindergarten context “dramatically affect” the children’s literacy development, and it is up to the teacher to “initiate this reciprocal flow”. It is clearly evident that many Tasmanian kindergarten teachers are undertaking this challenge to strengthen home-school partnerships as part of their literacy programs. This is especially the case with more experienced teachers and those from rural school locations within this study. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that unless parents are using these home readers effectively, the perceived benefit of involving young children in these programs may well be detrimental, rather than beneficial as intended by classroom teachers. This requires teachers to be constantly updating their knowledge and understanding of the complex process of young children learning to read and write. “So; if we are to genuinely assist children in their language and literacy learning efforts, if we are to be their “teachers” we need to become and remain learners about language ourselves” (Beatty & Pratt, 2003, p. 307).

Concluding Statements

Some important issues were revealed when considering the teacher-directed nature of the learning program offered within kindergartens in this study, when the teachers' levels of kindergarten experience, area of teaching specialisation, and the kindergarten location were taken into consideration. The key findings are presented as follows:

- ★ In respect of the location of kindergartens, teachers from rural schools were the highest users of home reading programs and whole-group handwriting sessions each week. In contrast, teachers in urban schools were the least likely to use photocopied worksheets and structured literacy programs with their classes, whilst teachers in isolated kindergartens were the highest users of these two practices. These findings would appear to indicate that urban located teachers are offering a more child-oriented learning program than their peers in other locations. This result is somewhat understandable given that teachers from urban locations would receive the highest level of pedagogical support within their teaching. Regular meetings are held for the professional development of kindergarten teachers, and owing to the urban teachers' close proximity to key administrative centres, they would be able to more readily avail themselves of these opportunities than their rural and isolated colleagues.
- ★ Primary trained teachers were the highest users of worksheets, whole group handwriting and big books for teaching reading each week, indicating that these teachers are teaching with a strong emphasis on the children engaging in teacher-directed literacy experiences on a regular basis. It is also important to note that all these teachers except one had over sixteen years of teaching experience.
- ★ Teachers with the most teaching experience (more than 25 years) in kindergartens were the highest users of photocopied worksheets on a weekly basis, whilst the least experienced teachers were the group using structured literacy programs, home reading programs and whole class instruction in handwriting most frequently. This latter result indicates that these inexperienced teachers are undertaking more formalised teaching approaches within their kindergartens. The reasons behind this move could be many, but it is suggested that, with the changing demands being made on schools by the central authority and the parent body to ensure kindergarten children are attaining set outcomes in preparation for Prep the following year, these teachers feel they need to offer a more structured learning program for the children in their class. Additionally, it is evident that although the Tasmanian Department of Education has supported a constructivist approach to teaching and learning for over twenty years, there are still some kindergarten teachers who are operating in a behaviourist theoretical perspective, as evidenced by their regular use of teacher-directed worksheets in their classroom.
- ★ When all aspects were considered, teachers with 16-25 years of teaching experience (n=40) were the group offering the least formalised learning programs. In addition, they were the biggest group of teachers from schools in urban locations. As pointed out earlier in this paper, these are the teachers who have available the most accessible professional development opportunities. Subsequently, they are handling the increasing academic expectations for children, associated with teaching in kindergarten, with attention to the provision of a child-focussed teaching program. However, the need for teachers from

isolated and rural locations, as well as those inexperienced teachers with limited years of teaching experience, to be involved in professional development opportunities would appear to be important. It could well be expected that leadership for these teachers would be forthcoming from senior staff within schools. However, it must be noted that over the past fifteen years across Tasmania, dismantling of leadership within the area of early childhood education has resulted in many teachers lacking appropriate daily support and guidance in the area of early childhood pedagogy (Boardman, 1999). It is suggested that this lack of quality leadership could be leading to a growth in inappropriate teaching provisions within kindergartens. This study clearly shows that the departmental trend towards leadership from staff teams within schools cannot provide the specific leadership and guidance required by kindergarten teachers, as the societal and educational pressure for greater formalisation of the kindergarten curriculum accelerates.

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