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Early childhood education: Factors that determine the parental selection of a preschool program

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Early childhood education: Factors that determine the parental selection of a preschool program

Abstract

Throughout the ages of mankind, parents have been motivated to provide the best for their children. It has been demonstrated by recent research that parents do have a critical influence on their children's education and development (Grotberg, 1979).

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:
FACTORS THAT DETERMINE THE PARENTAL SELECTION OF
A PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Early Childhood Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Linda Kay Buehler
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This Research Paper by: Linda Kay Buehler

Entitled: Early Childhood Education: Factors That Determine
The Parental Selection Of A Preschool Program

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Throughout the ages of mankind, parents have been motivated to provide the best for their children. It has been demonstrated by recent research that parents do have a critical influence on their children's education and development (Grotberg, 1979).

Parents have helped their children to develop emotionally and socially by exploring and testing their environment. In the latter half of the twentieth century, research findings have caused people of many nations to accept early childhood education (Bruce, 1983). Throughout the United States and other parts of the world, much time and energy has been spent developing and designing programs for young children. Figures compiled world-wide reflect the growth of early childhood programs. At the beginning of the 80's, the percentage of children enrolled in some sort of preschool education rose by: 80% in Great Britain, 73% in West Germany, 24% in Spain, 39% in France, 90% in the Netherlands, 96% in Belgium and 32% in the United States (Bruce, 1983). One fact is clear, where it is available, parents are choosing early childhood education programs for their children.

In the United States, the number of public school kindergartens is increasing, as are the public programs for

children three-, four-, and five-years old. Private schools are growing in number as tax supports and credits for child care increases (Cryan & Surbeck, 1979). In 1978 in the United States, there were over 4.8 million three- and four-year old children enrolled in preschool programs of one type or another. Additionally, over 3 million children attended kindergarten programs (Cryan & Surbeck, 1979). In 1982, according to the United States Bureau of Census, 51% of the total population of children aged three to six were enrolled in an early childhood education program; 21.8% in a preschool program, and 29.9% in a kindergarten program.

With this new growth and acceptance of early childhood education, many different types of programs have been developed to meet the various needs of children and their families. Each of these different programs are based on a set of beliefs and philosophies about how children learn, what their needs are, the learning environment, and many other aspects of early childhood education. This has supplied parents with an abundance of choices from which to select a program for their children. These choices concern differences in location, discipline methods, program philosophies, types of programs, class sizes, age limits, state standards, curriculums, teacher certification, policies, costs, size and area within the facility, equipment and teaching materials, food services, evaluation procedures, parent involvement, activities, service hours, and many other aspects.

The American family has always shouldered the responsibility for rearing its young; but now, as never before, many parents are becoming more aware of children's need to experience their environment. These experiences contribute to the child's academic, social, mental, physical, and emotional development. For various reasons, more parents are utilizing the services of trained educators to provide educational stimulation and growth for their child. Because parents want the best for their children, one question continues to be asked by parents: How Do I Choose Which Program Is the Best For My Child?

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the need for and the effects of early childhood education on the parental selection of a program for their child. No distinction or clarification will be made between differing models of programs. Also, no distinction is assumed between the normally developing and handicapped child, since it is proposed that any early childhood program should be dedicated to meeting the needs of the population of children for which it is providing services.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study involves determining reasons why parents choose an early childhood education program. The questions that evolve from this problem are:

- 1) Is there a need for early childhood education?
- 2) What are the effects of early childhood education?
- 3) What are the factors which cause parents to select an early childhood education program?

This problem and its questions will be studied by conducting a literature search. Only recent research findings, which include studies published from 1956 through 1986, will be reported in this investigation.

Importance of the Study

During the last three years, the author has taught preschool and encountered many concerned parents who want to select an appropriate preschool program for their child. Often parents do not know how to make this selection for their children.

Many parents feel it is the responsibility of educators to help them select the best program for their child. We who are early childhood educators, need to be aware of how parents make program selections. Knowing this, we may be prepared to better assist parents in their program selection process.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the review of literature which was published within the last thirty years, 1956-1986. Also, this investigation was limited to sources in the University of Northern Iowa Library.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study the following terms are operationally defined:

Appropriate selection: choosing a program which will best match the needs of the family and of the individual preschool child.

Early childhood education: the total curriculum for children in preschool and kindergarten (Anabar, 1982).

Parent: the primary caretaker of the child, either male or female, and of any relation to the child (i.e. grandparent, foster parent, aunt or uncle, or group home parents) (Wolfendale, 1983).

Parent education: efforts to provide parents with information which will increase their knowledge of factors that allow them to make an appropriate selection of a preschool program (Anabar 1982).

Preschool: refers collectively to programs for children between the ages of three to six.

Preschool child: the child from 3 to 6 years of age (Roberts, 1979).

Preschool curriculum: the program in a school for preschool children based on the school's and teacher's philosophy, policies, methods, materials, and goals.

Preschool education: the results of the methods and theories used to guide young children in preschools (Roberts, 1979).

Preschool program: the curriculum, environment, and total experiences offered to children three to six years of age within a school or child care facility (Mincey, 1982).

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Is there a need for early childhood education?

Children in a number of countries are deprived of the basic necessities for survival and are forced to work in dangerous, unhealthy conditions by their society and their own lower socio-economic parents (Challed and Eliman, 1979). *They are denied opportunities to enjoy childhood and to experience early stimulation and training.* A major theme of the International Athens Symposium (Doxiades, ed. 1979) which was held to consider the situation and needs of the child, was that, "progress in society can only be guaranteed if all forms of social planning explicitly take account of the child".

In an increased number of societies, including the United States, children are now guaranteed physical survival and basic health care. The present century has been called, "the century of the child" (Kennedy, 1971) because of the amount of legislation and the number of government reports designed to improve the quality of children's lives and protect their rights. Each child is now recognized as having needs and the right to develop to his/her optimum level of development.

The family unit has always had a large responsibility in meeting the needs of its children. In America, the

traditional family unit has consisted of a working father, and a mother that remains at home to provide for the children. During the late 60's, the traditional family unit started to undergo drastic changes. Numerous factors, far outside the controls of the family, continued to have an influence on the capabilities of families to parent constructively and competently (Smith, 1978). This situation has created an environment that has had an enormous impact on the American child.

The family of the 80's has had to struggle to maintain economic security. In 1982, one in every five families was headed by a female single parent with an average of two children (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1983). This has caused many women, who in the past have been home caring for their children, to seek employment to provide for their children. These women spend four to ten hours a day, working out of the home. The number of employed mothers continues to rise. In 1948 the chances of a child, of any age, having a working mother; was one chance in eight. In 1976 the chances of having a working mother were: Newborn to three-year old child; 1 in 3: three- to five-year old child; 1 in 2: and for the schoolage child, there was more than a 1 in 2 chance that the mother was employed outside the home (Women's Bureau, 1977). The Urban Institute of Washington projects that by 1990, 45% of all children under six-years of age, about 10 million children, will have working mothers (Cryan & Surbeck 1979).

These facts point out a definite need for child care, which makes it clear that for long periods of time during the day hours, children are required to be with someone other than their parents. But this still does not demonstrate a need for early childhood education. Before the current recognized need for child care providers was known, educators and researchers had made many interesting discoveries. Research on animals and humans demonstrated a pronounced relationship between environmental stimulation during infancy and later child development (Hebb, 1947, 1964; Spitz, 1945; Dennis, 1960; Skeel & Dye, 1939). Skeels & Dye as early as 1939, conducted an experiment with a group of institutionalized infants with a mean I.Q. of 64. The children in the experimental group were given large amounts of time with a mother-surrogate playing, talking, and training the children. The children in the control group were not given any special time, attention, or stimulation. The results were shocking: The children in the experimental group showed gains of from 7 to 58 I.Q. points, while the children in the control group showed losses of between 9 to 45 I.Q. points. Wayne Dennis in 1960, found similar results in his investigation. He studied young institutionalized children in Iran from two contrasting environments; one being deprived of adequate stimulation and the other within an enriched environment. He discovered that the children in the deprived environment were considered delayed in intellectual and physical development, while the children in the enriched

environment were progressing normally or above normal. Hunt in 1961, likewise found a large difference in children's intelligence quotient. He summarized a number of studies which provided evidence that early experience greatly influences intellectual development. He concluded that experience accounts for about 80% of measured intelligence, and that heredity accounts for only 20%. Bloom in 1969, also made investigations into the effects of environmental influences. While it had been generally accepted that intelligence was fixed, both Hunt and Bloom challenged that belief and asserted that the environment also greatly influenced the young child's development and skills. Bloom concluded that the first four years of life are the critical period in which differences in the rate of development become set. Frost (1969) supported Bloom's conclusions by reporting the findings of longitudinal studies which identified the early years as the period of most rapid growth in human characteristics and the most susceptible period for learning through stimulation.

More recent studies have been conducted in this area. Cryan & Surbeck (1979) have concluded from their studies that cognitive and motor development, language acquisition, concept formation and problem solving, are directly related to opportunities which provide practice, experience and allows for feedback. They also found that children need opportunities to experience a variety of materials, people and places with adults or older children who can answer

questions and stimulate further explorations. The young child who experiences a dull, repetitive environment, day after day, simply does not have the opportunities to exercise the mind and body toward new skills and understandings. The young child who watches several hours of television every day is missing developmentally essential learning opportunities from interactions with peers, materials and adults (Cryan & Surbeck, 1979).

These new findings were very promising, but would early childhood education be effective? Many educators supported the need for early childhood education for the benefit of our children and our nation. Parents agreed that early stimulation was very important for their children. Many different people, from all walks of life, wrote and spoke of the need for children's early education.

Marilyn Smith (1978) in a presentation at the Family Setting Priorities Symposium, stated;

This society has a history of rationalizing children's programs and services by presenting them as essential to groups other than children. It is interesting to ponder why we as a society are still unwilling to state clearly that the developments, needs and rights of young children are the reasons for providing early childhood programs and services.

Norma Law (1979) also wrote about the value of early childhood stimulation. In an article titled; What is Early Childhood Education? Some Definitions and Issues, she

stated;

If children are the future, their beginning years are precious to everyone. A rich society has vital opposites to reconcile in their care and education. Its basic convictions are on the line (p. 14).

Walter Mondale (1976) addressing the American Federation of Teachers convention on August 16, 1976, stated;

There is no issue before America today that is more critical than the one we discuss here today, for they involve the country's most precious heritage, our most precious resource, namely our children. The investment we make as a nation in the education of our country, will determine profoundly the kind of country that we will have over not just the next decade, but the next century as well.

For many reasons, it is apparent that a growing number of families need preschool child care outside the home. Many parents desire to pursue personal growth and development of their own skills and knowledge, which for a time, draws them away from their children and family duties. Although at one time grandparents or older siblings might have taken care of the young, grandparents are now frequently employed themselves, and the siblings are staying in school longer. Another stimulus for interest and expansion in early childhood education in many parts of the world, is the slow but steady improvement in basic child health, which has been

accomplished by greater attention to social and intellectual development of the child. Because of these three major changes in the American lifestyle of the 80's, what started out to help break the cycle of poverty, (U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, 1967) with goals such as;

improving children's health, emotional and social development, thinking, reasoning, and speaking ability, and to broaden children's experiences in order to increase their ease of conversation and improve their understanding of the world, providing frequent chances to succeed in a climate of confidence, increasing their interpersonal skills and strengthening the mutual understanding within families, developing responsible attitudes toward society and a sense of belonging in the community, providing opportunities for a variety of community groups to work with the poor in solving problems, reducing fear of authority figures, improving manners, behavior, confidence, self respect and dignity (p. 2 & 3),

has become generally thought of as a valuable and needed experience for all children (Powell, 1980).

During this generation, as never before, we have seen an emphasis on educational and technological advances. This has created a competitive spirit in parents and a desire to allow their children to do the very best that they can possibly do. (Langway, Jackson, 1983). Many parents feel that their children need the services of educational program. These

parents feel inadequate to do, what they believe, an early childhood education program can do (Langway & Jackson, 1983). On the other hand, there are those who question the need of school attendance for children, especially in light of its current popularity (Moore, Moon, & Moore, 1972). Moore and Moore (1973) stated that; "there is much talk these days, stimulated partly by accident and partly by design, that a young child cannot normally be fulfilled and optimately developed unless he/she goes to a good preschool" (p. 14). They review the maternal deprivation research and the research on early and late school entrants from the 1930's to early 1960's and conclude that preschool attendance provides material freedom at the expense of the child and threatens the integrity of the home. They believe that early schooling separates the family, threatens the welfare of the child, and risks speeding the children's development prior to their neurophysiological and perceptual readiness for learning. Moore and Moore concludes that: "for the highest and best cognitive, affective and physiological development, parents should do all they can to develop a wholesome home and keep the child there" (p. 14). They suggest that schooling be delayed until the child is 7 or 8 years old.

In answer to these beliefs, early childhood educators (Highberger & Teets, 1974) have noted their inappropriate equation of preschool and maternal deprivation. They believe that preschool programs for 3-, 4-, and 5-year old children are not harmful because they keep the children in school for

a shorter time than elementary school and provide more expressive language development. Further, they believe that the preschool staff is knowledgeable of child development and is able to provide meaningful environments in which the children can learn through play and socialization, and that the thought of many mothers staying home, full-time with their young children, is an impossibility for them at this time!

In summary, there is a clear picture that, within the last thirty years there have been many changes. These changes have come in the areas of: economics, child care, early childhood education, children's health and development, research knowledge, early childhood learning theories, the family unit, educational and technological advances, parental attitudes, and family needs. These changes and research findings, do demonstrate that the majority of educators and parents believe there is a need for early childhood education, to assure that the child will develop to his/her optimum level.

What are the effects of early childhood education?

A wealth of evaluational data for preschool effectiveness has emerged over the past thirty years. The pattern of outcomes from studies of preschool education is complex as well as controversial. One reason may be the lack of a clear consistency of programs. In the past, little has

been done to demand high quality preschool education. Therefore study results that are found in one program, may never be true about the results attained from another program. For example, the total time children spend in kindergarten and the qualifications of their teachers vary considerably from state to state. In Vermont in 1981, a five-year old might have attended school for 2 hours a day, or 10 hours a week, or 360 hours per school year. During that same year, a kindergartener in Hawaii, could have spent 6 hours a day in school, 30 hours a week, or 1,080 hours a year in school. Meanwhile, a majority of kindergartener teachers in most states have bachelors degrees. But some states hire teachers without degrees, and others prefer to hire teachers with advanced degrees. State policies dealing with preschool education programs for children younger than 5, are even less consistent (Robinson, 1982).

Another reason for such inconsistency and confusion in research findings, may be the lack of a clear statement of mission. Without such a statement, it is difficult to determine an appropriate criterion measure for empirical testing of the preschool influences. Every program may have differing goals and objectives that would influence the effectiveness of that program. For the goals of emotional and social development, which are usually somewhat consistent among programs, evaluation has usually been subjective, which again does not allow for consistency of judgement between programs. (Evans, 1975; Goodlad, Klein & Novathey, 1973).

Another factor that is not consistent or considered in evaluation results is the population from which the testing results are obtained. The evaluation results from a number of low-income deprived children, may not match the evaluation results of a preschool class of middle-income children.

Research in the area of preschool effectiveness seems to fall into three differing categories:

1) immediate effects of preschool education (those effects found within one or two years after the child progresses beyond the preschool age),

2) long-term effects of preschool education (results that are found by following-up evaluations on those children with preschool experiences compared to those children who did not have preschool education) and,

3) beliefs of educators and scholars (these are usually general in view of comparative effectiveness or professional research, but seem to be of great value within the field of early childhood education).

Immediate effects of preschool education

The research results of preschool's impact on children's cognitive, social-emotional development, and health status, as well as its impact on families and communities was studied within the Head Start programs. It was found that:

1) Children enrolled in Head Start enjoyed significant immediate gains in cognitive test scores, social-emotional test scores and health status.

2) Children from low-income families who attended a good preschool child development program, were better prepared for school; academically and socially. (McKey, et. p. 1)

The New York State Prekindergarten program (Irvine, 1982) operating at dozens of sites was found to produce not only a short-term effect on intellectual skills, but also a positive effect on grade placement during elementary school. This reduced special education placements and grade repetitions by one third, from an expected 26% of students to an actual 18%. Flint in 1979 found that preschool attendance has been related positively to children's extraversion and verbal competence as measured by the California Preschool Competency Test.

Many others found that preschool had positive effects on children. These positive effects were revealed by growth in the children's: self-esteem, social interactions and roles, and cognitive development, especially for low social-economic level children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kirchner, 1973; Wexley, Guidibaldi, and Kehle, 1974).

Children who have attended kindergarten significantly out perform non-kindergarten children on academic readiness at the beginning of first grade (Pinkle, 1974; Williams, 1974). They received better report card ratings (Conway, 1968), easier school adaptation (Conway, 1968), higher language and social studies achievement, (Chatburn, 1973; Ley, 1976), improved Piagetian cognitive development tasks (Russell, 1973), increased measures of mental maturity in

first grade (Conway, 1968), and higher achievements in reading, spelling, and arithmetic in second grade (Conway, 1968).

Miller in 1979, was interested in comparative effectiveness studies of different preschool curriculum models. He summarized the findings of three studies in which at least four different curriculum models were used and evaluated. According to Miller, it appeared that all well-developed models had beneficial effects on children, when the children were compared to those who had no preschool education. However, in terms of specific measures, those models with strong academic emphasis yielded greater gains on academic tests than did other models, maybe because these are the easiest to test.

The research findings of the immediate effects of preschool education seemed to be very clearly one sided. In general, children in preschool programs did develop to a greater potential than did those children who did not attend preschool education. But do these children who get a head start, maintain their level of excellence?

Long-term effects of preschool education

In 1975 investigators in the United States who had offered special preschool programs to the children of low-income families in the 60's, began coordinating studies of the graduates of their various programs in order to ascertain whether any long-term effects could be detected.

Under the title of the Consortium on Developmental Continuity, the investigators applied a variety of measures to the graduates of their preschool programs who ranged in age from 9 to 19. The following results emerged:

1) Preschool education significantly reduced the number of low-income children assigned to special education classes.

2) Preschool education had an "average" effect on reducing the incidence of grade failure among low-income children.

3) Children who had preschool education more often met the grade level expectation of their schools.

4) Preschool education positively affected later school performance independently of the effects of the early background measures.

5) Preschool graduates gave achievement related reasons for feeling proud of themselves more often than control group children.

6) When 10 program characteristics were tested for their contribution to the effects (i.e; length of program, degree of parental influence, program location, professional vs paraprofessional staff, ect.) none appeared more influential than others.

A more recent report of follow-up data on graduates of the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1980) confirmed the same pattern of positive outcomes. They also did an analysis of the economic implications of the long-term effects showing that the investment in preschool education

can yield substantial savings in terms of the cost of special education, subsequent employment, law enforcement, and teen-age pregnancy support.

Sprigle and Schaefer, of Florida State University (1984) investigated the influences of different program models and their long-term educational effects. They found that disadvantaged children who, along with their parents, took part in an intensive preschool program, reap substantially more academic benefits than peers who attended a preschool program that was less comprehensive. This study also found that high-quality preschool education can help poor children to lead significantly more successful lives by the time they reached 18 years of age. Those who had an intensive preschool program had significantly higher grades in reading and mathematics in fourth and fifth grade. Far fewer of these children were held back a grade or required special education classes. Academic advantages observed for the experimental group in the fourth and fifth grade disappeared in the sixth grade, but the achievement differences reappeared in junior high school.

In summary, all of the available follow-up data on the lasting effects of preschool education indicate general positive effects. It should be noted that all of the long-term data available thus far is generated by specially and carefully operated preschool programs, often in a laboratory-type environment, with funds for staff training,

testing, and other program amenities. Also, most of these results are from a test population of low-income children. These outcomes give a picture of the potential benefits of preschool education, when careful planning, operation, and monitoring of the programs are possible.

General beliefs of educators and scholars

The third area of preschool effectiveness is beliefs of educators and scholars in this field. These are usually not based on specific research findings but are attitudes which are based on the total preschool education picture. This seems to be an area of evaluation which allows for a high degree of controversy, and maybe unreliable data because of the degree of personal opinion.

Kagan (1976) suggests a critical skepticism of the view of child development. He states that during the first few years, individual differences are just as likely to result from differences in rates of development as they are to be products of experiences. Have the experiences caused the growth or has the normal development of the child caused the growth? Would the growth have had an opportunity to happen without the experiences?

Begley (1973) believes that children may learn to mimic, but not develop a creative or curious mind from the influences of early childhood education. Along with this, many psychologists question and fear that intense early learning may not only harm the child, but impede other

skills. They are concerned that experiences infused with unpleasant emotions may never reach the memory banks and have detrimental effects upon the following learning experiences (Begley, 1983). She also believes that children can be made "smarter" by preschooling, but they can achieve no more than their brain allows. She concluded that early childhood education could save children who would founder in impoverished homes, but it does no more for young intellects than interested caring parents can do! The fear of pushing or demanding too much from the child is also shared by Bertha Campbell (1985), head of the Bureau of Child Development at the New York State Department of Education. She believes that demanding preschool programs create too much stress for children and can have damaging consequences. She warns that data is available to show absolutely that if you structure too quickly, you will kill the child's creative thinking.

David Elkind, child psychologist at Tufts University (1984), fears that children may experience failure and loose self-esteem, not because they are unable to do something, but because they are presented with inappropriate materials and demands that they are unable to handle at an early age. Other fears about preschool education are based on the issue of safety for the children in preschool programs. Recent accounts of sexual abuse in day-care centers in New York, California and Illinois have caused much concern for state officials and educators and heightened parental anxiety (Thornton, 1984).

Many people have positive beliefs about the general effects of early childhood education. Jorde (1986) states that "many view early education as the most promising vehicle for preventing poor academic performance by students during their late school years" (p. 173). Hymes (1985) states, "I've had a long-standing professional conviction that early childhood education is good for all children (p. 16). Also, many families believe that their children have grown in all areas of development because of their preschool experiences.

In summary, because of these beliefs, coupled with the need for child care, many parents are enrolling their children in early childhood education programs. It is at this time that parents face the problem of making a choice, and being knowledgeable about the possible choices to make. The available preschool programs amount to a virtual smorgasbord, ranging from sheer play to highly intensive instruction in languages and computer skills. Consequently, parents face the problem of choosing an appropriate early childhood program for their children.

What are the factors which cause parents to select an early childhood education program?

We have discovered through research that: 1) a vast majority of American families are in need of child care services. 2) for many, there is a need for early childhood education to create an environment that will stimulate each

child's ability to develop to his/her optimum developmental level. 3) for many parents there is a belief that an early childhood program can provide their child with experiences that the family could not give, 4) the short- and long-term effects of preschool education are generally very positive in nature, and support the belief that early childhood education is valuable, and 5) there are concerns and fears about the harmful effects that some preschool programs may cause some children. With these findings in mind, we will now look at the factors related to the parental selection of a preschool program.

For every child enrolled in an early childhood program, a parent(s) has faced the problem of making a choice concerning which program to select. Is it really a problem? Some may say, "There is a preschool program down the street, I have to be to work at 9:30, the babysitter will pick him up from school because it is close, and our neighbor Edith, told me that she knew a friend whose friend brought her girl to that preschool and they liked it, so I'll sign him up and he will start next week"! Or, is it as James Young, professor of Early Childhood Education at Georgia State University says: "Making a choice is becoming one of the most troubling problems many parents face" (Thornton, 1984, p. 76).

Some previous research results to determine how and why parents selected their child's early childhood program, have brought to light the fact that many parents are not particularly thoughtful about their choice of a program.

They seem satisfied to obtain second-hand information about the program from relatives, friends, or neighbors, rather than to systematically visit or compare several local programs (Bradbard, Endsley & Readdick, 1983; Powell, 1980; Suelzle, Gans & Katz, 1977). Powell (1980) reported that the parents in his Detroit sample were more likely to use "informal" sources of information (i.e. family, friends, neighbors or co-workers) than more formal sources (i.e. welfare officials, referral services or newsletters) prior to making a program selection. In Powell's research, parents said they investigated the program they eventually selected, but a clear distinction was not made between the number of parents who investigated programs by first-hand methods, (i.e. visiting, observing in the program with the teacher and children present) as opposed to second-hand methods, such as phoning or asking other people.

Suelzle, Gans, and Katz in 1977, conducted a study of parents in the Evanston, Illinois area. From this survey, they found that parents frequently sought the advice of "secondary consultants" (i.e. neighbors, friends, or family) prior to making their child's program choice. They found that mothers in their sample (with only peripheral help from their spouse) did all the "leg work" and made the final choice of their child's program. Joffe (1977) and Kameran (1980) in their studies, suggested that the "leg work" and how the final decision was made added up to be: 1) seeking advice from neighbors, friends, or relatives, 2) child's

needs. This may mean that the mother would look for a preschool that offers a learning program, opportunities for children to interact socially with competent adults and peers, and a program that provides quality meals or snacks. 3) consideration of cost. Most parents are in favor of the cost factors being relatively low, and 4) finding a school with hours which match the parent's work schedules.

Marcia Forbes conducted a survey in 1960, in the state of Florida. She included parents of children who were presently enrolled in half-day or full-day preschool programs. She was interested in finding, not only, reasons for parental selections but also if there was a difference in the means of selection because of program choice. She found the following:

Table I

Forbes: Parental Selection Factors:
Half-Day/Full-Day Program

Percent of parent's responding from each program.

Half-Day	Full-Day	Findings
63%	54%	Located the school through a friend
56%		Wanted enrichment in art and music
	38%	Location was most important
	27%	School hours was most important
54%	32%	Visited/children present
17%	8%	Visited/children not present
11%	19%	No visit or teacher meeting
	88%	Because mother is not at home
	73%	Mother is full-time workers

Parents of children in half-day schools indicated that they sent their children to these schools to prepare them for first grade and to furnish opportunities for social experiences with children their own age. Parents who visited the school before enrolling their child, thought that the teacher's ability and teacher-child relationships were important to them. Several of these parents mentioned that the program adequacy, and cheerfulness of indoor and outdoor space was important. A few parents mentioned that the cleanliness of the facilities was important in their selection of a program.

Forbes, looking at the parental differences in selection techniques and program selections, then drew several conclusions from her survey results. She found that parents with children in the half-day programs were different in their preparation and reasons for choosing a program, than the parents with children in the full-day programs. Parental reasons for their program selection, between the two sets of parents, were very different. She found that the majority of parents with children in the full-day programs, made their program selection because of parental needs to have full-day care for their children, while at work, school, or elsewhere. She also found that these parents did not do as much research to assure themselves of their children being placed in quality preschools.

She concluded that the majority of the children whose parents enrolled them in half-day programs, had considerations and desires for the development of their child. Most of these children were enrolled in programs because of the parent's choice, or the child's need, not because of necessity. These parents also reported doing more research to assure their children's placement in quality preschool programs.

Bradbard, Endsley and Readdick (1983) conducted a telephone interview study of two southeastern college communities in which the children attended six different profit making education programs. Their study was done with 86 parents who had a high-school education, many of whom also had at least two years of college. Parental approval was gained before each preschool program provided the names and telephone numbers of the parents. Most of the interview questions were open ended, allowing parents to have complete freedom in answering. A precoded form, which contained a variety of possible responses to each question and additional spaces for "other" responses was used by the interviewers to expedite on-the-spot classification of the data. Their findings were very interesting, as they questioned the areas of parental selection factors.

Prior to enrolling their children, nine out of ten parents visited the program that they selected for their child (which was a much higher percentage rate than other studies have found), but 66% of these parents did not visit

any other programs to make comparisons. This seems to be a statement that shows that parents either: 1) suppose that all preschool programs are quite the same, so they see no need to further investigate, or 2) before the parent enters a preschool of his/her choice, they have almost made the final choice to choose that program. Almost ten percent of the parents that made no prior visit to the preschool they selected, felt that a visit was not necessary, because the school or its director had an "excellent reputation" (Powell also found this parental attitude in his study in 1980). Thus, these parents were relying solely on the second-hand recommendations of other people (many of whom the authors suspected had probably never made first-hand comparisons among preschools themselves!).

A question was asked of the parents who did visit the program that they selected for their child (90 percent): What did you do while visiting the preschool program? The answers were very interesting and give a picture of the parent's knowledge in judging quality in a preschool program. Their answers were as follows:

Table II

Bradbard, Endsley, and Readdick: Parental Participation
During A Preschool Visitation

Percent	Parental Participation
61.6%	spoke to the preschool director
37.6%	observed the children in class
32.6%	observed on-going activities
24.4%	observed the teachers
20.9%	checked the play equipment
34.9%	engaged in a variety of activities, (explanation of policies, asking situational and disciplinary procedure questions, and touring the total school building).

It seems that very few parents involved themselves in a total check of program quality, teacher credentials, or program goals, to determine if a particular program would meet the needs of their child. It could be speculated that parents wanted to assure program quality, but were not aware of the procedures for doing this!

As their initial step in finding a program for their child, 30% of the parents surveyed used the Yellow Pages and 28% used the telephone as their first step in finding out about a school. Of the parents surveyed, 16% said that they took only one step in the selection process, which was to talk with the school director about the preschool program. This did not involve observation of the program. Twenty-four percent took two steps in the selection process. The most common two-step pattern involved use of the telephone and

then visiting the center. Forty-five percent of the parents took three steps in their selection process. The most common pattern was, talking with friends or neighbors, telephoning the preschool, and then visiting. Only fifteen percent took four steps. They talked to friends and neighbors, telephoned the preschool, visited and then talked with the preschool director.

They also asked parents to rank order the five most important items they considered in making their program decision. They found that the parents most important selection factors were:

- 1) providing an educational program
- 2) staff competency
- 3) preschool location
- 4) cost - relatively inexpensive fees
- 5) nutritious meals or snacks

In summary, many parents do receive help to make their *child's program selection*. This help may come from child care referral services, neighbors, friends, program directors, or yellow pages. The final decision of which program to select, does rest primarily with the parents. Can the parents make a terrible choice? Will the child's life be affected either positively or negatively? We have discovered from this research that there are many positive immediate- and long-term effects from preschool education. We have also learned of the many concerns and fears of specialists and

educators. It seems that the preschool choice and the affects, either positive or negative, may make a difference in a child's life. Many educators believe that the first year of school profoundly affects the student's future performance, which will affect the following years. This choice seems to be of great importance!

Beliefs about parents making this choice run from one extreme to the other. Bradbard, Endsley and Readick stated that, "In fact, it has been our distinct impression that parents are much more likely to comparison shop before purchasing many major household goods and services than they are prior to choosing program services for their own children... (1983, p. 160). On the other hand, Barbara Bowman of Chicago's Ericson Institute says, "some parents think that if their child doesn't enter just the right preschool, he or she won't get into the right college (Thornton, 1984). Kameran & Suelzle (1977, 1980) have concluded that choosing an educational program is a very elusive process for many parents. It was very evident to them that while parents might be trying to obtain all the necessary information to make a quality program choice, they might not know the whole range of things to look for, or the appropriate questions to ask when visiting a program. In fact, they state that during the course of the parent interviews, several parents spontaneously mentioned that they felt insecure about how to choose an appropriate program.

For example, one mother said:

Something really needs to be done to help parents select a program...I didn't know what I was doing...leaving my child was a traumatic experience, until I realized she could learn more from the school than from being at home with me (Suelzle, 1977, p. 165).

Something does need to be done! Knowing how and why families select early childhood programs for their young children is important. With this knowledge, provisions can be made to offer a service to educate parents to be knowledgeable consumers of these services, that are known to vary substantially in quality, and that can make a difference in a child's life!

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary and Conclusions

The past thirty years of research and its results have brought us to an awareness that learning is a continuous, lifelong process. It has been researched by many and concluded that the quality of a child's life, is directly related to early childhood experiences that establish the foundation for this lifelong learning (Hymes, 1985, p. 16).

Children can grow up in a world of negative influences and experiences, which will form the foundation for their later learning. We know that many of these children mature to add to the populations of deprived, delinquents, welfare dependants, drop-outs, jobless and prison mates. If a child's creative expressions or opportunities to learn are stifled, then the failure of that child to develop toward his or her potential, will rob the world of solutions to the problems created by this negativeness, and only add to the problems.

However, if a child's early years are filled with many experiences that range from free choice activities within a stimulating environment, to well planned and directed instruction, it will enable the child to progress at his or her individual rate of development. This child will have an enriched foundation on which to build further learning

experiences.

There is virtually a smorgasbord of early childhood programs, each offering and working towards their own individual goals and purposes. The ideas and basics that form the foundation of early childhood education should be constant in every preschool program, but beyond this foundation, there are no two programs that are operated, taught, or have exactly the same results. Just as each program is unique so are the children, for which they exist. Therefore, it is important to note that no single program model is best for all children.

This research has found that many families of the '80s have a need for child care. This has caused many parents to look outside of the family to meet these needs. Because of the many recent findings showing positive effects of early childhood stimulation, many preschool programs have come into existence, and those already operating, have grown in popularity. Many young children who had been deprived, were placed in educational programs. Mothers in need of child care services also started to use these programs. Many other parents who were concerned about providing the best possible learning experiences for their child(ren), made preschool choices for their children.

As the growth of preschool participation continued, it was concluded that immediate- and long term- positive effects were being made by children who had attended quality early childhood programs. As these findings continue to be

printed, the growth of preschool education continues at a rapid rate. With such popularity there are those child specialist and educators that have great concerns and fears of how early childhood education could affect children. They fear that early education programs could cause: high stress levels, possibility of failure, poor self concept, loss of creativity, poor or negative learning attitudes, and health hazards such as physical, emotional, or sexual, child abuse.

Millions of parents each year are making preschool choices for their children. It has been found that all parents do not use the same selection practices. For some parents making a program selection seems to be traumatic. These parents are very concerned about the results of their choice and the affects it will have on their child. It was found that these parents cause themselves to become more knowledgable about early childhood education, and follow more steps to assure themselves of a quality program selection. For other parents, making a program selection seems of no great importance to them. They do very little to learn about the program, and usually do not take many steps to assure program quality. The child is enrolled, taken to class, and picked up after class. All other program selecting parents seem to fall somewhere in-between these two extremes.

It was found that there are many factors related to the parental selection of a preschool program.

These factors are as follows:

- 1) program visitation
- 2) help from friends and neighbors
- 3) observation / visitation with program teacher
- 4) observation / visitation with children attending the program
- 5) visitation with the program director
- 6) geographic location
- 7) program operation hours
- 8) preschool curriculum
- 9) cost
- 10) program appearance
- 11) play equipment and toys
- 12) program policy
- 13) disciplinary methods
- 14) parent's use of the Yellow Pages
- 15) parent's use of the telephone
- 16) staff competency
- 17) nutritious meals and snacks
- 18) effects of the program
- 19) reactions of those who have used the program services for their child

These factors which relate to the parental selection of a preschool program seem to be linked with the parents amount of concern and reasoning for their child attending a preschool program. Those parents who select a program

because of child care needs, may do less to find and assure themselves that a quality preschool has been chosen. Those parents who select a program because of a concern for the child and his/her beginning learning experiences, may do more work to find and assure themselves that a quality preschool program has been chosen. To be assured of a quality program selection, parents considered several schools and make personal judgements to determine if the quality of a program will give them the results they want. Then they will act upon their decisions.

It is believed that parents can use selection factors successfully to find a quality program that will meet their families needs, but it seems essential that parents:

- 1) have a clear picture of their reason for sending their child to a preschool program. This reasoning will determine the type of program that the parents will look for, what to look for within that program, and assist the parents to make a quality program selection.

- 2) know how to judge the quality of the program features which most interested them. Smith (1978), says that, "parents need to be aware that no setting, including the family, assures children of the opportunities to facilitate rather than inhibit the fulfillment of their potential" (p. 14). The National Council of Jewish Woman's Window In Day Care, reported that only 1% of the programs visited by them, qualified as "superior" and only 15% as "good" (Moore, 1978). The quality of the preschool program is dependent upon the

parents final judgement in relationship with the child's needs. A good program with methods and materials that is best for one child, may not work successfully with another child. Children and programs are unique!

3) act upon their judgements of program selection. If at all possible, the parent needs to follow-up on their program selection by visiting the school through the year, volunteering to work in the class, going to parent's activities, getting involved with their child's learnings and being interested in what's happening at school. This will enable the parent to continually evaluate the quality of the preschool program.

The wish of every parent, "to provide the best for their child(ren)" may be fulfilled by parents that, through a careful process, select an appropriate preschool program for their child(ren). This may enable him or her to develop to the optimum level of his or her individual capabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

More research is needed! Early childhood programs have been the focus of much research in the last decade, but there are still several areas where research is needed:

-Comparisons between the results of children who attended "high", "middle", or "low" quality programs.

-Which models of programs are best for which children?

(different learning methods)

-Results of parental knowledge of quality preschool program factors, and the final early childhood program that is selected.

-Parental satisfaction with different preschool programs.

-Correlation between parental satisfaction and parental involvement with the preschool program?

-Will early childhood education increase or decrease the involvement of parents in education?

-And maybe most important; The continual development of appropriate early childhood education programs for all children.

Many questions still go unanswered about the field of educating young children, but as time goes on, these questions will be answered, and the children will continue to gain!

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:
FACTORS THAT DETERMINE THE PARENTAL SELECTION OF
A PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

A Research Paper
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Master of Arts in Education

by
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