

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS, especially elementary school principals and early childhood directors and content specialists, who want to learn more about preschool-age learners and preK programming and instruction. Ideas about how to educate four-year-olds for later success in school have shifted dramatically over the years and continue to shift as we learn more about how young children learn and about the benefits of preK for long-term academic success and social and emotional outcomes that support it. At the same time, the accountability movement has put enormous pressure on educators to pack as much learning as possible into the preK day to level the playing field for all children. These expectations have sparked many debates among early educators, including how to reconcile developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) with expectations embedded in state early learning standards and preK classroom quality checklists; how to best integrate preK within the elementary school setting; how to manage the preK classroom to maximize child-teacher interaction, and how to design instruction to build literacy and math skills without boring students, to name a few.

To help answer these important questions, we place the reader inside instructional contexts where teacher and child behavior unfolds. We then analyze the situation described and, through this process, make important points and offer suggestions for educators based on our combined experience of more than ninety years in preK classrooms. In other words,

we take events and turn them into case studies about some of the most critical topics in preK education.¹ Sometimes our analysis focuses on a specific learning domain, such as oral language or number. At other times, we focus on the design of instruction or the organization of the physical environment. At still other times, a case is concerned with managing child behavior or understanding a specific characteristic of preschoolers' minds.

There are a lot of moving parts inside instructional settings, and small things can make a big difference in how well things go. We focused each case to make situations easier to grasp, while also keeping in mind that instructional situations are complex and that a case loses power if oversimplified. A reader will probably get the gist of a chapter with a fairly quick first reading. Deeper understanding, however, will require a bit of studying in subsequent readings. We suggest that readers consider the book a resource to which they return as needed. For example, when planning for a conference after a classroom observation, a specific chapter might come to mind as especially relevant.

We did not set out to provide a comprehensive overview of preK curriculum and instruction or a complete picture of preschool children as learners. Our goal, instead, was to provide stories to prompt readers to think deeply and in new ways about preK-level teaching and learning. Each chapter's key event is based on our personal experiences in preK classrooms, in the roles of curriculum developer, coach to teachers or district-based mentors, supervisors of beginning teachers, or outside program evaluators. We used pseudonyms for both children and teachers and, on several occasions, combined related events from two or more classrooms into one prototype to allow a more complete treatment of the preschooler's learning or a difficulty that preK teachers experience. The chapters rest more heavily on our experience in programs for lower-income children whose later school achievement is at risk than on our experience with children in more economically secure communities, because these settings are typically more challenging for preK teachers and are where we spent much of our time over the fifteen to twenty years before writing this book.

The book has five parts. The chapters in part I focus on classroom organization and management, especially on how the lack of teacher attention to organization and management hinders children's learning. The three chapters in part II focus on the many contributions that play makes to a preschooler's learning. Part III is concerned with literacy skills and oral language, with two chapters devoted to each topic. The three chapters in part IV are also concerned with some aspect of literacy and oral language, but the specific focus here is on understanding the interactions between preschool children's thinking and their learning. The three chapters in part V consider leadership for preK in elementary school settings, with one devoted to communication between teachers and a building leader, another devoted to a discussion of professional development, and the third to how preK classrooms and teachers were fully integrated into an elementary school setting. Each part has an opening description that provides more details about the key points made in its chapters.

The reader will notice that we have several central concerns about preK education. First is the balance in preK programming between a focus on literacy and numeracy skills and attention given to other domains that preK standards address (e.g., science, social-emotional development, physical development and health, science, social studies, creative arts). Numeracy and language and literacy get most of the attention in many preK programs, and within the areas of language and literacy, literacy skills often get more attention than oral language. Then, within oral language, oral vocabulary often gets more attention than broader language skills, such as listening comprehension and back-and-forth conversations.

Second, we are concerned about both the quantity and quality of teacher-directed, whole-group instruction in some preK programs. Often, academic skills instruction is repetitive and boring, yields knowledge of isolated facts without much understanding, and runs the risk of creating in children negative attitudes toward school and learning. Many instructional approaches used in these contexts squander, rather than exploit, the preschool child's cognitive capacity. An additional problem is that so much

time is spent in teacher-directed, whole-group, academic instruction in some classrooms that time for child-selected activities, including play, is squeezed to the minimum. This change is shortsighted, because child-directed activities can support social skills that are essential to academic success (e.g., self-regulation and executive functioning), develop positive attitudes toward learning, and provide opportunities for preschoolers to apply and consolidate learning from other parts of the preK day.

A third concern is that preK teachers sometimes rely too heavily on prepared curricula. Even though core curriculum materials provide essential guidance for novice teachers, they can limit teacher development, especially when supervisors and other leaders require rigid fidelity in the implementation of highly prescriptive curricula. Teachers need to depart from the teachers' guides to adapt materials to their own circumstances. With support and feedback, exercising judgment is at the heart of teacher development.²

The remainder of this introduction provides a historical overview of preK education in the United States. Preschoolers are relative newcomers to the public school setting, and the history of preschool education differs from that of the elementary school. An acquaintance with the history of preschool-level education helps instructional leaders in public school settings understand preK teachers a little better.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT: NATURE OR NURTURE?

Preschools, once called nursery schools, started in the United States during the child study movement in the 1920s as part of child study institutes. Having children on-site gave researchers easy access for studies. The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial funded nursery schools in these institutes at several universities.³ Perhaps the best known was the Yale Clinic of Child Development, directed by Arnold Gesell. Gesell's research involved close observation of all aspects of behavior in young children and linking them to chronological age. The norms established indicated the average or typical age at which specific behaviors were expected to appear.⁴

Until the late 1950s, Gesell and many other child development researchers assumed that changes in development—progress from one developmental milestone to the next—resulted primarily from maturation controlled by an internal timetable dictated by each child’s genes. A logical conclusion drawn from this theory of development is that intellectual differences in IQ or achievement in school are predetermined, not influenced by experience. Of course, not everyone held a genetic view of readiness during the 1940s and 50s, and educators who didn’t tried to build readiness for reading, for example, in the first months of first grade. By the 1950s, reading readiness programs were used in many kindergartens.⁵ Educators adhering to a progressive philosophy of education resisted these narrowly focused readiness programs, arguing that children needed mostly time to mature in a context that provided a broad range of rich experiences. Most preschool education leaders remained strongly aligned with norms and the associated wait-for-maturation approach to readiness, because of their history within the child study movement.

James Hymes, a leading figure in progressive preschool and kindergarten education in the middle of the twentieth century, spoke against the idea of building readiness in *Before the Child Reads*: “Harm is done. Books of drills, books of exercises, books for special ‘readiness’ practice cost money that could be used elsewhere. They cost time that could be better used elsewhere. Too often they result in bareness and meagerness and in poverty of thinking and feeling and doing. These books usurp the hours that could be given to all the rich and worthwhile activities these children are ready for.”⁶

In speaking specifically about reading readiness, Hymes claimed that the biological structures of seeing and hearing, both necessary for learning to read, depend primarily on maturation and growth in the early years: “The reader must have keen eyes, observant and attentive. Those eyes must have grown enough so they can quickly see, when they are taught, that *c* and *e* and *o* are different. That *b* and *d* and *p* are not the same . . . Those eyes must be so developed that the child can know right away, when he is taught: *Ball* and *Tall* do not look alike . . . Hearing is the child’s nature . . . He will grow—we do not have to force feed him.”⁷

This view of development began to crumble in the 1960s in the face of evidence that intelligence and associated academic knowledge were strongly related to a child's early experience. Joe McVicker Hunt's book *Intelligence and Experience* provided a thorough review of the research on the role of experience in the development of intelligence and a bold statement about the new theory's implications: "It is no longer unreasonable to consider that it might be feasible to govern the encounters that children have with their environments, especially during the early years of their development, to achieve a substantially faster rate of intellectual development and a substantially higher adult level of intellectual capacity."⁸

This new view of intelligence prompted the funding of experimental, early intervention programs in the 1960s to test the idea of IQ as malleable. Most of these programs stressed oral language development and general cognitive and social development, not narrow academic skills development; nor were they highly didactic. Outcome measures always included IQ tests, rarely assessments of specific academic skills.⁹ Most programs had positive immediate effects, and some had effects that were long term. These positive results opened the door for funding Head Start in 1964.

DEBATES ABOUT WHAT TO TEACH, AND HOW

Some preschool-level leaders feared that new information about the role of experience in intellectual development and academic achievement would lead to the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills, quickly and directly, outside meaningful contexts, and to a decrease in concern for the whole child. As states developed learning standards for K–12, starting in the early 1990s, and for preschool-age learners soon after, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), closely aligned historically with views that gave maturation a prominent role in development, began to publish position statements on DAP. These statements stressed print-rich environments that helped young children see the usefulness of reading and writing, and spoke out against formal instruction in preK and kindergarten. The position statements

also stressed the importance of addressing all areas of development and child-initiated learning.¹⁰

But as concern about kindergarten readiness in lower-income children increased, some preK programs began to include large- and small-group, literacy-related experiences, especially in response to two influential books, *Beginning to Read*, by Marilyn Adams, and *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, by Catherine Snow and colleagues.¹¹ These books diminished the influence of an earlier book, *Emergent Literacy*, by William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby, which had provided an approach to literacy that was somewhat compatible with DAP.¹² Over time, changes occurred not only in the balance of goals addressed with preschoolers, tipping it more toward academic skills, but also in instructional approaches.

Following the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), these changes escalated. The legislation affected kindergarten practices directly, which then trickled down to preschoolers, especially those attending preK classrooms located in elementary schools. Principals concerned about meeting fourth-grade benchmarks had learned that a good start toward building foundational literacy skills in the preschool years could help. How this was accomplished was sometimes more in line with kindergarten practices than with practices that had been more typical in preschools. Early Reading First (ERF) funding was also provided in the NCLB legislation to develop excellent programs to support language, literacy, and cognitive development in preschoolers.¹³ ERF grants, awarded by the US Department of Education, required applicants to describe how they would address oral language and three literacy skills—print awareness, phonological awareness, and alphabetic knowledge—in a planned and coherent way. ERF applicants were also required to assess oral vocabulary (receptive), phonological awareness, and alphabetic knowledge, in fall and spring of each year, using standardized tools. Guidance for proposals indicated that programs should provide a variety of different contexts for children's learning, including teacher-directed or teacher-guided large and small groups, in addition to the child-initiated activities that most preschool-level classrooms already provided in a daily Center Time. The prospect of ERF funding also prompted publishers to create

instructional materials for the preK level. The National Science Foundation funded the development of math curricula for the preschoolers in the late 1990s, and commercial publishers made those available, too.¹⁴

PRESCHOOL-LEVEL PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

As programs for preschool-age children expanded, research continued to look at their benefits, especially on long-term achievement. The evidence suggested that high-quality experiences for three- and four-year-olds made a significant difference in school readiness and later school achievement and were cost effective, but also that quality was extremely uneven.¹⁵ A 2016 analysis of the effectiveness of ten early intervention programs summed up the findings: “Research shows neither that ‘pre-K’ works nor that it does not; rather, it shows that some early childhood programs yield particular outcomes, sometimes, for some children.”¹⁶

Results of a statewide preK program in Tennessee, published in 2015, provided a jarring example of an ineffective preK program. At the end of preK, program children’s achievement was higher than the achievement of control children on all outcome measures, and the program children’s kindergarten teachers said the program children were better prepared for school and had better school-related work skills. By the end of kindergarten, however, the control children’s achievement had caught up. Achievement levels were still the same for the two groups at the end of first grade, although first-grade teachers’ ratings of program children’s work skills and attitudes toward school were more negative than the control children’s. By the end of second grade, the control children’s academic achievement was better than the program children’s, and this situation held through third grade.¹⁷

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT WHAT MAKES PREK EFFECTIVE

In a Brookings Institution report, Dale Farran, a researcher involved in the Tennessee study, spoke candidly about preK education: “Lack of evidence about which skills and dispositions are most important to effect

in pre-K and what instructional practices would affect them has led us to the current situation of poorly defined, enormously varied programs, all called pre-K, as well as a reliance on a set of quality measures with no empirical validity.”¹⁸

The quality measures Farran considered problematic included the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and the benchmark ratings created by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). According to Farran, “Each . . . has some notable psychometric problems, yet each . . . has been woven into quite consequential policies. None . . . was developed on the basis of empirical knowledge of which skills are most important to affect in pre-K.”¹⁹

In a subsequent Brookings paper, Farran raised concerns about teacher-directed, large-group instruction in preK and questioned whether the trend toward whole-group instruction in kindergarten had made its way into programs for preschoolers. She also worried that increases in preK funding for classrooms in public school settings would turn preK into a beginning level of kindergarten.²⁰ In our experience, inappropriate and inadequate programming for four-year-olds is not confined to public school settings. Each setting (e.g., Head Start, community-based childcare, public schools) has its own biases and blind spots, and also strengths.

CONCERNS ABOUT PREK EXPANSION

Despite the long-standing issues surrounding preK quality, including unanswered central questions about exactly what a child might learn in preK that matters for long-term academic success, policy makers and politicians currently agree that education for four-year-olds should continue as an approach to decreasing the achievement gap and income inequality, and expand to meet the need.²¹ Head Start has never enrolled more than approximately 50 percent of income-eligible children, and the need for early education is greater now than thirty or forty years ago when the achievement gap was between lower-income and middle- and

higher-income children, not between lower- and middle-income children and their higher-income peers, as it is today.²²

Many early educators also want universal education for four-year-olds to replace the targeted funding used historically to serve only very low-income children of preschool age.²³ As many view education for preschool-age children as an important social investment, funding for additional preK classrooms is likely to materialize. The danger is that increases in preK classrooms won't be accompanied by major improvements in the quality of programming provided. That's where instructional leadership can make a difference, and we hope that this book will help.