

Junior Kindergarten

In Chesterfield County, Virginia, kindergarten students are tested extensively before starting school and placed in a program designed to meet the needs of their developmental level rather than chronological age.

According to David Elkind (1981), humans establish during childhood either a firm sense of industry or an abiding sense of failure. Children who encounter academic demands before they are ready may experience a series of failures that impair their self-concept and future learning. The Gesell Institute researchers estimate that one-third of the children chronologically old enough to enter an early childhood program are developmentally six months or more too young for the experience¹.

To improve children's chances of early success, Chesterfield County, Virginia, last year piloted a junior kindergarten program in 13 elementary schools. Because of its success, it has

been instituted in all the county's elementary schools this year.

Junior kindergarten is a year-long alternative program for children of legal school age who are not developmentally ready for kindergarten—either socially, intellectually, emotionally, or physically. It is designed to prevent early failure syndrome. Although junior kindergarten children may take three years to complete kindergarten and first grade, they experience daily success. Because these are the children who would most likely have to repeat kindergarten or first grade under the present organization, junior kindergarten generally does not add additional years to their schooling.

Placement and Evaluation

Testing for appropriate placement is crucial to the success of the junior kindergarten. In Chesterfield County, the placement process begins the spring preceding school entry, when children are administered the McGraw-Hill Cooperative Preschool Inventory and the "Draw a Person" test. During the first month of school, children are given SRA's Primary Mental Abilities test and assessed for fine and gross motor development. The results of these tests and teacher observations are then used to determine which kindergarten tier is most appropriate for the child.

It is important that local norms be established to predict which children will be successful in a particular kindergarten program, and that placement not be based on just one testing instrument. Lack of maturity—not yet having the ability to function in a kindergarten class—is one reason why children fail at so early an age. But maturity is difficult to assess in a one-to-one testing situation. That is why information from parents, preschool teachers, and the regular teacher is also important in assessing children's readiness. Thus, final placement, based on developmental level rather than chronological age, is determined by the end of September.

The Two-Tiered Kindergarten

Junior kindergarten is the first tier of the two-tiered model; regular kindergarten is the second. Although some children are reassigned after school begins as more information is gathered, the initial placement must be as accurate as possible. The pupil/teacher ratio of junior kindergarten is kept lower than in the regular kindergarten, and parents and children dislike changing teachers after school begins.

The junior kindergarten program being piloted in Chesterfield County uses two classroom models. One is a self-contained junior kindergarten classroom with a maximum 20:1 student/teacher ratio. An instructional aide works with the teacher for a minimum of two-and-a-half hours each day, and a weekly planning period for the teacher, aide, and program administrator is built into the schedule.



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The second classroom model is designed for schools having more than 20 students per teacher or that do not have enough students for a self-contained class. This second classroom has some junior kindergarten and some regular kindergarten children. Here again, there is a 20:1 student/teacher ratio and an instructional aide, but both the junior and the regular programs are taught. In the split classroom, alternative social studies and science programs are used so that junior kindergarten children will not have to repeat material and activities the following year. Children in the regular kindergarten section work with games and activities that have them matching letters, learning beginning sounds, and so forth, in addition to the activities assigned to the junior kindergarten children. The achievement of both junior kindergarten and kindergarten children in this split classroom model has equalled or surpassed student achievement in traditional kindergarten classes.

Curriculum

Because junior kindergarten is developmental rather than remedial and serves children of all ability levels, the choice of a curriculum model was a major decision. Chesterfield County chose the Cognitively Oriented Preschool Curriculum, developed by David P. Weikart, which is based on Piaget's work and fosters active learning. In active learning, children learn concepts by using concrete materials. It is the child's action on the materials that gives feedback and fosters understanding. In addition, the program is open-ended to allow children to participate at their own level. The role of

adults (teacher and aide) is facilitative to help children extend and expand their language and become problem solvers and critical thinkers. Weikart's long-term research shows that high-risk children in this preschool program made greater gains in education, employment, and social responsibility than did no-risk children who did not attend preschool (Schweinhart 1985).

Measuring Success

During the 1985-86 school year, we began a longitudinal study that will follow the junior kindergarten children through the primary grades and compare their achievement and retention rates with those of children who did not begin in junior kindergarten.

We will also examine which specific skills, behaviors, and other traits of students entering school ultimately prove to be the most accurate predictors of successful performance. If we could identify these, we would be in a good position to offer sound advice to parents about the best programs for their children.

Finally, we will examine the quality of the training provided to the teachers in terms of how well prepared they are to implement the curriculum, and how they think the training could be improved.

Perhaps by providing a better match between children and their early learning experiences we can build a firm foundation for their successful future learning. □

This program was funded in part through the Chapter 2 Block Grant Competitive Projects program, Research and Program Development Service, Virginia Department of Education.

1. Gail B. Jorklund and Margaret Krekis, Gesell Institute, as quoted in *Education Week*, 6 March 1985.

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