



4-1-1981

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Billie (1981) "Early education in rural areas?," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 8: No. 3.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1910>

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ECE programs need to be tailor made

Early education in rural areas?

By Billie Thomas

Three major areas of concern confront the educator who is designing and implementing programs for Early Childhood Education (ECE) in rural areas. First, should communities become involved in the lives of young children? Second, will there be enough children to justify programs? And third, what can be done about the special problems rural program will face?

Should we become involved?

Many of the social issues historically associated with ECE have been related to the fear of tampering with the almost mystical relationship between child and family. Children were viewed as legal possessions and responsibilities, first of their parents, and then of their extended biological families. During the last generation, the American nuclear family and extended family have undergone radical changes. Today, for example, a majority of preschool children will spend time in a single parent family. More than half the mothers with preschool children are working. Extended families are smaller, and in our mobile society, often live thousands of miles away from the young children in their family. All over the nation parents are asking the community for help and support for themselves and their children.

Do we know enough to help them? Will we do more harm than good by becoming involved with young children? Over the last 20 years, research has shown that the bonds within the family may actually strengthen when the child is in an ECE program, especially when the family is included (Kagan and Whitten¹; Kempe²; and Weikart³)

A Westinghouse Study 12 years ago showed that children who attended ECE programs had only a slight general academic benefit because of a "washout" effect during the second grade. It has been discovered that this conclusion was premature and subsequently inaccurate because the "washout" is temporary.⁴ Since then, many thorough efficacy studies have shown the "washout" appears in the second grade for some unknown reason, and that after second grade the academic benefit increases yearly for the children who attended ECE programs. By seventh grade, children who attended preschool have 50 percent fewer special education placements and 50 percent fewer grade retentions than comparable groups which did not attend preschool.⁵

Educators often promote continuous programming as an educational goal because it would eliminate unnecessary assessments, records, and training for educators, and would also eliminate unnecessary adjustments for students and their families. However, because of different funding patterns, philosophy and organizational structure, continuity has not been a reality for the preschool through elementary levels.

Preschool provides a somewhat protective, generally individualized situation where one-to-one child-staff interactions and active parent involvement are characteristic. Upon entering the structured public school system, however, both parents and child may feel resentment at the somewhat non-personal approach to placement and programming. It seems only reasonable that continuity from preschool through the elementary years should be an imperative goal for ECE programs.

Because of the academic benefit to children, the support and training for parents, the continuity of programs, and the savings in later decreased special education programs, ECE programs are an advantage. Funding for such programs should be viewed as a financial investment for rural communities. An investment which not only pays dividends in better education but also in financial efficiency.

Will there be enough children?

During the 1960s, rural communities experienced an out-migration of young families which prompted educators to question the need for future ECE. However, the vast rural-to-urban migration that was in the 1960s has been reversed in the 1970s. The trend that produced this reversal seems to be a sharply diminished attraction to the nation's massive metropolitan areas and more settlement in the smaller rural and urban cities (25,000 to 49,999 people) as well as small towns and rural areas.⁶ During the late '60s and early '70s many rural areas experienced increased growth in prosperous and slow economic periods. For example, an economic downswing seems to return the earlier out-migrant to family and friends, while the economic upswing may bring new migrants seeking small town amenities which they cannot find in the more congested, costly environment. The people moving are young, with the peak rate among all persons occurring at 23 years of age.⁷ Consequently there is an influx of young people into rural communities during prosperous and slow economic periods.

In the **completely rural** counties, the natural increase of population has been very low since 1970 because of the comparative shortage of adults of childbearing age (resulting from past out-migration), and the growth of older populations of higher mortality. The high rates of

rural growth are found among counties with retirement areas, recreation areas, senior state colleges, and with large metro areas nearby. Geographically, several subregions have had rapid growth. The Ozark-Ouachita Area, the Upper Great Lakes Cutover, the Rocky Mountains, and the Southern Appalachian Coal Fields⁸ are examples.

An additional factor is that the birthrate in rural areas has not declined as much as in urban areas. However, despite the increase in population and the slower decline in birthrate, the total number of children still decreases as the age of the child decreases. For example, as of spring 1976, Montana had 55,000 children under five years old; 60,000 children under 10 years old; and 73,000 children under 15 years old. Another way of looking at this is to consider the number of children under five years old per 1,000 women. For the total U.S. population, the number decreased by 18.2 percent from 1970 to 1976. While there is a slow decline in rural areas, the number of children will not be expected to increase in rural areas, and if present trends continue may decrease by about 2½ percent per year.⁹ This means that a class of 20 children would lose one child every other year.

This small anticipated decline in children hardly seems to indicate abandoning or not starting ECE in rural areas. Perhaps it even justifies channeling **more** resources to ECE and making efforts to provide all the support we can to young children and their families. An analogous example is rural physicians. As their number has declined in rural areas, they have become **more** valuable. When one considers today's preschoolers, realizing they are the resources of the future, each individual becomes that much more precious.

One might consider the future years from a personal point of view. In the 21st century, today's preschoolers will be adults. Imagine that you are old, and can no longer care for yourself. Because of the economy your family must work, and someone else must care for you during the day. Would **you** like to spend those days in the cheapest building in town? Perhaps a church basement or some space that cannot be used for anything else? Your caregivers may have invested a whole \$2,000 in necessities such as beds, tables, chairs, bookcases, eating utensils and games to be used by over forty other people. At a charge of \$5 per day there could be no money for carpets, field trips, movies, or other extras to brighten your long days. Instead you will be sent outside and to the TV because they are free.

With one "nurse" for each ten people you would not get much attention. Of course, this is not a real "nurse," with college training. That would cost too much. Perhaps someone who is not able to be a waitress or secretary. A person who will work for absolute minimum wage, with few increases, or none. "Nurse" will have no paid vacations, no insurance, no coffee breaks, no sick leave, and no paid time to plan for you.

Does this future appeal to you? Do you think "nurse" will feel good about you? Or that you will feel good about you? This is of course the model we provide daily for millions of young children. Remember, they will be the adults who care for us in our old age.

What about special rural problems?

The rural schools face special problems as they become **more** involved in ECE. Identification of students, transportation, staffing and program choice are all critical issues.

Finding the children becomes important because mandatory schooling is set at seven years for most states, and families of preschoolers may not realize there is a possibility to involve their child in ECE programs. Also the "captive audience" is not available as it is in the elementary and secondary school. If a family does not like the program, for example, they can leave it.

Special efforts must be made to locate students and to involve their families. Utilizing the existing resources in the rural community is one way to begin this task. Coordinating and planning with local resources such as public health, social services, and census agencies can also lead to successful identification procedures and parent involvement.

As of 1978, 78 percent of preschool children were driven to school,¹⁰ and the distance traveled to school was considerably longer for those living in rural areas, averaging 50 percent farther than in metropolitan areas.¹¹ Transportation costs will continue to rise, and will become more prohibitive in rural areas, especially where winters are severe or where the changing residential patterns and consolidation of schools have increased the distances to be traveled by students.

Lack of trained staff may also be a problem, and with declining enrollments and teacher layoffs, the tenured teachers may not be trained in ECE. However, because the intrinsic rewards of working with young children are highly valued administrators can usually find someone willing to attend summer workshops for that critical additional training. An elementary teacher is **not** an early childhood specialist; however, special planning, program development, interaction, and group skills are all necessary to prepare good elementary professionals to work in a quality ECE program.

Rural children too have moods particular to the rural lifestyle. The lack of peers often means the group social skills are less likely to develop. Once in groups they may need more time to develop interpersonal skills. They are usually accustomed to more space than urban children, so may need time and help adjusting to limited school boundaries, group limits and processes. They also need to learn about urban lifestyles, just as urban children need to learn about farms and rural communities. The school is often the child's primary link to public health, social services and community resources, and these services are often utilized only after school entrance.

Parents in rural areas have special needs also. They may need support groups that the rural locale does not provide. These may include parent groups, crisis nurseries, day care, toy libraries, and human services agencies, all of which may be miles away and made prohibitive by inadequate transportation.

Which program design?

These needs of rural schools, staff, children, and parents all lead to questions of program design. One possible answer is the **Center Model**. Here, children are removed from the home and educated together at a central location. The advantages are that the school can control many learning variables, and thus modify the total environment. The major disadvantage is the heavy financial burden that results from transporting children to the center and the long travel time involved. There is also the possibility of alienating the family due to their inability to become involved in the school's program.

The **Visiting Teacher Model** is another option and entails a trained teacher who is sent into the home to work with the child for a specified amount of time, usually on a weekly basis. Parents may, and often do, choose to leave during these sessions. The advantage of this model is that it provides a one-to-one teacher/child interaction in a familiar situation with no travel time for the child. The disadvantages are the travel expense and the teacher salary during travel time. It has also been shown that staff burnout is highest for this model.

In a **Home Visitor Model**, an educator goes into the home to train the mother and/or father to stimulate their own child. Outcomes using this model can be substantial, provided the interaction between the visitor, parent and child is positive and motivating. Financial considerations relating to long distances for travel and staff time again become important costs in this model.

The **Cluster Class Model** involves motivating parents and children to travel two to four mornings a week to a center, where the children are placed in groups and parents are placed in adult classes. After class, parents pick up their child and return home. Cluster Classes provide the desirable advantages of the Center Model, such as socialization in groups, controlling the learning environment, availability of equipment and trained staff. Travel costs are absorbed by parents, and staff has no travel time. The disadvantage is that the high level of motivation and cost may deter many of the parents from becoming involved. If the school provides transportation and babysitting for siblings, this model is more successful.

By considering the students, staff, parents, community, transportation, finances and goals, each community can decide which program model will best meet its needs. A local needs survey would be a good place to start. Let the parents tell you about needs, and the community tell you about resources.

Conclusion

It would seem obvious that ECE programs should be developed in rural areas. There is a population, and problems such as identification, transportation, staffing and program design can be solved through community planning. However, it is important that rural areas act now,

so that inequities in essential ECE services will not become worse.

Young families and young children are some of the greatest future resources a community can have. If ECE programs and support services are non-existent or inferior in rural communities, it is probable that young families will leave and seek them elsewhere.

Footnotes

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