

Shannon Haines
Unit Eight – Part A

Because of my involvement in early childhood education, I am often asked by parents about the programs offered in our school. They wonder if their child is ready for Kindergarten, or if they should send them to our Young 5's class instead. They want to know if their child should spend one more year in Preschool before moving on. Parents want answers about the benefits of our early childhood programs and why they should send their children to either of these two programs. I often take time with them individually asking them more specific questions about their child and their desires for the child before giving them my thoughts. Since it's almost the end of the school year, I am finding that most parents are again looking for what they will do with their child in the fall. Therefore, these questions are once again becoming common for me. Due to this, I have decided to delve deeper into the importance of early childhood education for my project of inquiry. I am hoping that my findings will also help me to give more informed answers to these parents.

My inquiry will start in my classroom, with my own self-reflection. I will observe my own students; reflect on what they have done in these past nine months and how far they have come. I will think back to previous years and do the same. I will talk with my classroom aide who has been with me from the beginning and see how she feels about the students in our room and how they have grown. I will reflect on my methods and hopefully use those reflections as a base or starting point for continued inquiry.

I will then move on to my current school building, in the Pre-School classroom setting. I will do some observations of the students daily to determine the types of skills they are working on at this point in the school year and how their performance. I will then talk with the Pre-School teacher and ask her about the student's progress both as individuals and as a class. I will talk to her about the role that fantasy play, such as that which Paley talks about. I will ask her opinion of seeing her past students and question Paley's "standing tall and above average behavior" as applied to these past students that she is still in contact with. I will also question such things as student experience that they bring to the classroom, as Dewey discusses. I am hoping that these methods of inquiry will help give me a good understanding of how she feels that the early childhood program can be beneficial to all students.

I will then move on to the Kindergarten classroom. At this level, the teacher has had experience with students from many different situations. She has had students who are new to the school experience. She has had students who have attended the Young 5's program or the Pre-School program, or even both programs before coming into her classroom. I will do a similar inquiry. All of these students know me and are used to me being there, so they will not act differently because I am present. I will be a participant observer in the classroom for a few days, this time to actually see what is going on. Afterwards, I will also take time to talk to this teacher and ask her comparable questions, but with more focus on what she notices, particularly at the beginning of the year. I will ask about the similarities and differences in each group of students and how it affects the learning environment if they are at different levels, as I suspect they are.

I may also spend time doing equivalent observations and interviews in classrooms with older students, simply to find if there is any difference as the students become older. I wonder if the students who have attended some form of early childhood program have any advantages because of the early intervention or if they are in the melting pot by the time they are in the later elementary grades.

After this, I will focus my inquiry on resources that I can find. I will look at statistics that can be found in local surrounding schools. I will also look at statistics from across the state, then the nation to see if

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they are comparable. I will most likely use the internet for information around the state and nation. As for the local schools, I will have to rely on phone calls and stops into the central offices for my information.

While visiting surrounding schools, I hope to be able to talk with some of the teachers and staff in those buildings also. I work in a parochial school in the city of Clare. I know that the public school in Clare does not offer any form of early childhood education before Kindergarten. About half of the students we service for early childhood move to the public school system in Clare by Kindergarten. This means that they are seeing large groups of students who may not have had any formal schooling before Kindergarten. We service approximately 40 students in Pre-School and Young 5's. The public school has three Kindergarten teachers at this time and as of now, each class is around thirty students. This means that only about a quarter of their students have been involved in an early childhood program. I am hoping that I can spend time talking with these teachers as I will with the Kindergarten teacher in our building to see if she notices any differences and what her thoughts are about the early childhood program.

The other two nearby public schools do offer Pre-School programs, so they are servicing students who may or may not have had this opportunity also. I would like to be able to interview these teachers and possibly observe their students also. I feel that while this may take some time, it will give me a good feel for what is going on at least in the surrounding areas, and especially let me know how other professionals feel about the benefits of children attending an early childhood program.

Another thing that I would like to do for inquiry is to research the differences and similarities in the early childhood programs that are offered. I know that not all programs are the same. Some offer services only two days a week for a couple of hours a day. Others offer half days for four or five days. Still others offer three full days a week. I'd like to see how that affects student learning. I'd also like to look at the curriculums that are offered in these different programs. In Michigan, there are Head Start Outcomes, but as far as the Michigan Curriculum Framework, it begins at the Kindergarten level. When researching similar information before, it seemed that each program had their own program that they worked with, but it was not based on a certain state or national curriculum. I wonder if the different choices that are made in these individual programs affect the outcomes of the students also.

I am hoping that by using all of these different methods of inquiry, such as reflection, observations, interviews, and data collecting, I will be able to acquire a better understanding of exactly what the benefits are of early childhood programs. I will be better informed and able to answer parental questions with more accuracy and confidence knowing that what I am saying is not based simply on what I think or see in my classroom, but what others have witnessed also.