Four questions about full-day kindergarten that matter more than test scores [1]

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EXCERPTS

There are a lot of people disappointed with the results of Ontario's full-day kindergarten program. According to a just-published study that compared the students in the first three years of the program, it hasn't translated so far into better scores in reading or math at the end of Grade 1. The kids aren't doing worse, but academic benefits are what everyone has focused on, because that's largely how the $5-billion-a-year program was sold by the Liberal government. (Even the author of the study, Janette Pelletier, a child development expert at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, says that the "fade-out" early learning measurements was a surprise.) Critics who call it "expensive babysitting" and think little kids should be at home more (a tricky feat when so many of their parents are working), are full of "I told you so's."

But hold on. It's true that full-day kindergarten has not - at least not yet, anyway - transformed the province's youngest scholars, when it comes to early reading and writing scores, as a story by my colleague Caroline Alphonso pointed out last week. But the study suggested that kids maintained an advantage in other social and cognitive areas essential for school success. Their parents were also less stressed, and, in surveys, reported improvements in their kids on nearly every early learning measurement. All of which raise some important questions about the program that go beyond test scores:

1. Isn't reducing family stress a legitimate reason for a social program? The study conducted a "parental hassle survey" and found that parents were significantly "less hassled" if their kids were in full-day-kindergarten - which will comes as no surprise to any family that has tried to juggle half-day school with full-time work. Household stress also has a negative effect on long-term student achievement - to say nothing of the health of families in general, and the benefit that comes from facilitating work, especially for low-income parents and single moms, who have struggled most with child-care costs and logistics. What's more, parents are happy with the program and report seeing a benefit in their children. Why aren't these results seen as equally valuable to, say, boosting results on standardized tests?

2. What is happening in Grade One? By almost every social and cognitive measure, the full-day kids had an edge over their half-day peers going into Grade One - but lost that advantage by the end of the year. Researchers are not yet sure why this is but some suggest that the more formal teaching structure in first grade may not be capitalizing on the benefits of play-based learning - something many educators hope will change over time.

3. What measurements really matter for future academic success? Students in full-day kindergarten significantly outscored their half-day peers in two important areas: vocabulary and self regulation, which include the ability to focus, follow instructions, and co-operate with peers. Those gains held up through Grade One, and some research suggests, in the long run, have a larger effect on adult outcomes. (Another plus: The more kids who arrive to class with these skills, the better the learning environment is for everyone.)

4. Now that we have a benchmark, how can we improve the program? It's hardly realistic to expect an education change requiring a huge cultural and curriculum shift for teachers, and major school re-organization, transform student outcomes from day one. "It would be naive to expect a new approach to work on every dimension right away, and there is always room for improvement," says Pelletier. What's clear in the study is that some significant kinks still need to be worked out. In particularly, some classrooms have too many students. There's a shortage of early childhood educators, which means, according to Kerry McCuaig, an early childhood researcher also at OISE, that sometimes principals have to pitch in to cover absences. Co-operation between teachers and the ECEs now sharing their classrooms continues to be an issue. These are problems, however, that will take time to fix.

Even so, we would be wrong to expect that full-day kindergarten will fix all problems for every child, and perhaps both experts and politicians should have been more cautious about over-selling it, especially at the beginning. A universal system offered to all families will not produce the same results as the targeted, specially-designed interventions for disadvantaged children often cited in U.S. studies. Sweden took decades to create a preschool system that earns praises around the world (hopefully, we can learn from them and go faster.) Given the size of the investment we need to ask critical questions about the program, without making hasty leaps. Ideally, ongoing

research will reveal how we can make improvements, not just to the kindergarten program, but the next grades as well. For now, at least one group appears happy to reward the program an A-plus: the families actually using it.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail
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