Placement of Twins and Multiples in the Classroom: A Brief Survey of School Counselors' Knowledge and Attitudes

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Abstract

This study investigated 65 school counselors' perception of classroom placement of twins and multiples. The results showed that most of the participants had twins and multiples in their schools, but that they were neither aware of their school district nor building´s policy regarding placement. Most participants supported early separation, already at preschool or kindergarten, and believed that separation would have a positive impact on the children's development. However, over 70% reported having no training on issues associated with twins and multiples in school system. Implications for research and practice are addressed.

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The rise of twin and multiples birth (triplets or higher) have been dramatic since 1980, largely due to older age childbearing and the use of fertility enhancing therapies or assisted reproductive techniques (National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, 2008). This steep climb of twins and multiple births has created a need to understand what happens when these children start school. Starting school is a developmental milestone for all children but may require additional emotional effort on twins and multiples if separated from each other for the first time (Segal & Russell, 1992). Hence when starting school, one decision that needs to be made is classroom placement, whether or not keeping the children in the same classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes and knowledge of school counselors concerning the classroom placement of twins and multiples. As advocates for students´ mental health, school counselors could play a significant role by sharing information and data twins and multiples in the school system and help parents and teachers make a decision about placement.

The decision regarding classroom placement can be challenging for parents and the school personnel alike. Most schools uphold strict policies regarding the separation of twins and multiples upon school entry and it is not uncommon that schools make the decision without involving parents in the process (Gleeson et al., 1990; Tully et al., 2003). In an Australian study, a third of parents reported never being consulted regarding their childrens´ placement and 40% reported only rare consultations. Hence, it is not uncommon for parents of twins and multiples to have disputes with their children´s

schools, and one such argument tend to be over classroom placement. In actuality, of all the different social agencies and systems that parents of twins and multiples encounter, they tend to have more arguments with the school system than any other (Gleeson, Hay, Johnston, & Theobald, 1990).

The basis for determining classroom placement has not been well researched nor its consequences on academic and emotional development (Beauchamp & Brooks, 2003; Gleeson et al., 1990; Segal & Russell, 1992). This decision is more often based on individual case reports in which pathologically close twins' development are stunted until separated (Gleeson et al., 1990; Hay Preddy, 2006), or the belief that twins are overly dependent on each other (Beauchamp & Brooks, 2003). Another reason for separating twins is to minimize the competition between them (Segal & Russell, 1992). Gleeson et al. further argued that the separation of twins and multiples may be due to teachers´ preference of having it that way, as having the children together may complicate teaching and add additional pressure on teachers to keep up with the children´s academic levels and not compare their skills and abilities.

In a U.S. study, 84% of twins were found to be in separate classrooms (Segall & Russell, 1992). Data also show a difference between patterns of placement and type of twin. Parents of monozygotic twins prefer common placement in early school years to a greater extent than parents of dizygotic twins (Segal & Russell, 1992). In a large Australian study, Gleeson et al. (1990) examined classroom separation rates and attitudes of teachers, parents and twins regarding classroom placements. The results showed that twins were separated with an increasing rate with time in school. Twenty-nine percent was separated in the first year, 50% in the second year, and about 60% in

the following four years. It was also discovered that close to 25% of the twins experienced cycles of separation that is they were separated one year and the following year reunited.

Gleeson and colleagues (1990) also investigated the reasons for separating the children and asked teachers and parents to rank attributes among the children that gave reason for separation. For teachers, the four most common reasons were: dependency/reliance, restrictions on each other, language and social maturity, and ability differences. Parents rated the attributes quite similarly: dependency/ reliance, opinions of the twins, language and social maturity, and restriction of each other. The most glaring difference between the teachers and parents´ ratings was parents desire to acknowledge the wishes of their children (Gleeson et al., 1990).

Only a few studies have been conducted that investigate the effect of separation of twins in the school settings. In one study, little over 30% of twins stayed unhappy for a pro-longed period after the separation according to the parents (Gleeson et al., 1990). In a longitudinal study in United Kingdom, Tully et al. (2003) investigated the impact of separation of young multiples at age 5 (first year in school) and then 18 months later. No differences were found between separated and non-separated twins on symptoms of attention-deficit and hyper activity disorder, and externalizing and prosocial behaviors. However, monozygotic twins that were separated showed more internalizing problem (e.g., withdrawn, anxious, depressed, somatic), problems that continued over time. Monozygotic twins also presented with more reading problems when separated. Yet, separation seemed to benefit dizygotic twins in that they work harder as rated by teachers than when staying together (Tully et al., 2003).

In 2005, researchers in Netherlands replicated Tully et al.´s 2003 study (van Leeuwen, van den Berg, van Beijsterveldt & Boomsma, 2005). These authors found similar results to Tully et al., that separated twins experienced short-term internalization problems compared to non-separated twins. Whereas Tully et al.'s study indicated greater internationalization problems among monozygotic twins compared to disygotic twins, such findings were not replicated in van Leeuwen and colleagues study.

In summary, only a few empirical studies exist that can guide parents and school personnel regarding the placement of twins and multiples, which is unfortunate given that such decision have to be made by many parents and school staff each year. Given the important role that school counselors has in supporting the well being of students and schools by serving as consultants to parents, teachers, and school administrators (Nugent, 2000), learning more about schools counselors' attitudes, knowledge, and roles in regarding twins/multiples' placement seems important. This was also was the purpose of the present study, and three questions guided our study: (a) do school counselors know their schools and districts´ policy regarding classroom placement of twins and multiples; (b) who do school counselors think should be involved in the decision regarding classroom placement; and (c) what do school counselors know and believe are the reasons and potential consequences for keeping the children together or apart in the classroom.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of 65 school counselors (female, 73%, *n* = 49) from two school districts in two Midwestern states. The majority, 73% (*n* = 47), had obtained a

Master degree, 15% (*n* = 10) indicated they had obtained an Education Specialist degree, and 12% (*n* = 7) reported other (e.g., Ed.D, MSW). The participants' age ranged from 26-72 (*M* = 51.72; *SD* = 10.68). About 44% (*n* = 28) worked in elementary schools, 29% (*n* = 18) in middle schools, 24% (*n* = 15) in high schools, and 10% (*n* = 6) reported other. The year of experiences as a school counselor ranged from 1-35 years (*M* = 10.07; *SD* = 7.22).

Instruments

A questionnaire was created for the purpose of the present study. In addition to demographic questions (e.g., age, genders, years of school counseling), it contained questions regarding school counselors' knowledge, attitudes and roles regarding twins/multiples in the school setting. Specifically, the questionnaire included: nine multiple choice (e.g., do you know your school´s policy regarding the placement of twins and multiples in the classroom; At what age do you think it would be appropriate to place twins and multiples in different classrooms) and four open ended questions: (a) What do you think are the primary reasons for keeping twins/multiples in the same classrooms; (b) What do you think are the primary reasons for keeping twins/multiples in separate classroom; (c) Do you know the potential psychological, social or cognitive effects are by separating twins and multiples; (d) Do you know the potential social, psychological, or cognitive effects are by keeping twins and multiples together in the same classroom.

Data Analysis

Two members of the research team (one faculty member and one student) analyzed the open-ended questions. Each coder independently reviewed the answers

for each question and created categories for each question using an open coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, the two research team members met to compare, discuss, and revise categories until both of them were satisfied with the categorizations.

Results

The results showed that most, 84% (*n* = 54) of the participants had twins or multiples in their schools. About 9% (*n* = 6) reported having no twins or multiples and 8% (*n* = 5) did not know. Approximately 42% (*n* = 26) reported having been in contact with parents regarding the classroom placement of their twins and multiples, whereas 60% (*n* = 7) had not been in touch with parents regarding such issues.

The participants were asked about their school district´s policy regarding the placement of twins and multiples. With reference to the school district's policy, 66% (*n* = 42) reported not knowing their district´s policy; 19% (*n* = 12) reported that the school district did not have a policy; and 17% (*n* = 11) reported that the district had a policy. In terms of building policy, 45% (*n* = 29) reported not knowing their school´s policy; 37% (*n* = 24) reported knowing their school´s policy; and 20% (*n* = 13) reported that their school did not have a policy. Of the 21 participants, who responded to the question to record their school's policy, 18 reported that the policy was to separate the children and two responded that parents were asked were asked about their preference.

The participants were asked at what age it would be appropriate to separate twins and multiples in the classroom. Most, 41% (*n* = 26), reported that it would be appropriate to separate twins and multiples between the ages of 5 or 6; 31% (*n* = 20) reported between the ages of 3 or 4; 27% (*n* = 17) reported between the ages 7 and 9;

14% (*n* = 9) reported between the ages 10-12; 11% (*n* = 7) reported between the ages 12-15; and 11% (*n* = 7) reported between the ages 15-18. Participants were also asked to mark all the individuals they thought should be involved in the decision of placement. About 88% (*n* = 57) reported that parents should be involved in the decision; 73% (*n* = 48) reported the principal; 72% (*n* = 47) reported school counselors; 69% (*n* = 45) reported teachers; and 48% (*n* = 31) reported that the twins and multiples themselves should be involved in the decision. When asked to rank who should have the most say in the placement decision (1 = most say to 5 = least say), parents were ranked first, followed by the principal, teacher, school counselor, and twins/multiples themselves.

In terms of graduate education and training regarding the unique issues of twins and multiples in the school system: 77% (*n* = 50) of participants reported having received no such training; 23% (*n* = 15) reported having received some training; and 2% (*n* = 1) reported much training. Furthermore, only 3% (*n* = 2) of participants reported that information or material were available about twins and multiples in the classroom. Of the remainder, 57% (*n* = 35) of participants reported that no material was available and 41% (*n* = 25) of participants responded that they did not know whether any such material were available about twins/multiples in their schools.

The first open-ended question requested participants to record the primary reason for keeping twins and multiples in the same classroom. Fifteen participants answered this question with stating that there was no a good reason for keeping twins and multiples in the same classroom. Six participants responded that they did not have an answer to this question. The remaining answers fell into four categories: (a) emotional support (e.g., support the bond between the children, ease transition to

school, decrease separation-anxiety, enable the children to support and challenge each other); (b) parents´ wishes for the kids to stay together, (c) children´s wishes to stay together, and (d) school reasons (e.g., save cost, one class per grade, less parent-teacher conferences).

In terms of the reasons for separating twins and multiples, the answers were divided into three categories: (a) supporting individuality (e.g., decrease dependence, support autonomy, enable the children to grow, excel, try on different roles, make friends without a sibling close by); (b) avoid family issues playing out in the classroom (decrease sibling rivalry, competition, and arguments); and (c) teacher concerns (avoid teachers' preferential treatment, prevent monozygotic twins abuse of physical features to confuse teachers and substitute teachers).

Lastly, the participants were asked about the potential psychological, cognitive, and social consequences of keeping or separating twins or multiples in the classroom. In terms of separation, 26 participants reported having no knowledge about the potential consequences. The remaining participants listed a range of negative consequences, using words like: depression, loss of support, separation anxiety, fear, and concentration difficulties. The positive consequences of separation included: learning more social skills, more interaction with other children, increased self-reliance, and developing their own identity.

Similarly, 30 participants reported having no information about the potential positive and negative consequences of keeping the children together. The participants who responded to the questions listed mostly negative consequences, such as: bickering, competition, dependence, shyness, loss of identity, loss of social skills

because they have a constant play mate, and possibility of teachers treating the twins or multiples as one unit. A few positive consequences were also listed, these were: built-in-buddy, comfort, and the ability to focus.

Discussion

This study examined school counselors´ knowledge and attitudes regarding placement of twins and multiples in the classroom. The results revealed that most participants, over 80%, had twins and multiples in their schools. However, a majority of the participants were unaware of whether their school district had a policy regarding placement, and only 37% reported knowing their building's policy. In most of the cases where policy was known, it advocated for the separation of twins and multiples. These results are in line with previous findings, that separation of twins and multiples are the common trend both in the United States and other Westernized countries (Gleeson et al., 1990; Segall & Russell, 1992; Tully et al., 2003).

The findings also revealed that most of the participants, 75%, believed that twins and multiples should be separated at an early age, either in kindergarten or preschool. Almost all participants believed that the parents should be involved in this decision and should also have the most say in the decision. Next to parents, participants believed that school personnel including teachers, principals, and school counselors, as well as children themselves, should have a say in the decision. Children were ranked as having least say in the decision. These findings diverge somewhat from recent reports, in which parents and the children have less say in the placement than teachers and principals (Gleeson et al., 1990; Segall & Russell, 1992; Tully et al., 2003). We did not ask the

participants at what age they believed children should be involved in the decision, and future research may investigate children's experience and beliefs regarding placement.

The results also indicate that close to 80% of the participants had received no training concerning twins and multiples in the school system, and that 98% did not know whether any information or material were available in their school regarding placement of twins and multiples. Not only is there a lack of research of twins and multiples in the school system, (Beauchamp & Brooks, 2003; Gleeson et al., 1990; Segall & Russell, 1992), but there also seems to be a lack of training of school personnel that may encounter these children and their parents and material to help school personnel and staff with such decisions.

While our qualitative results reflect the lack of knowledge and training in this area and as many participants reported having no information about the available data regarding placement, most of the participants seemed to favor separation. Separation was believed to enhance the children's development, identity, individuality, social skills and esteem, while keeping twins and multiples together would stunt such social and psychological growth. Additional reasons for separating children were to support teachers and the classroom environment, with the belief that having twins and multiples together in the classroom may make it more difficult for teachers. Several participants did state that keeping the children in the same classroom may make the transition to school easier, and provide more emotional and social support for the children. The participants´ responses to the reasons mirror some of the contemporary literature and thought regarding placement, although unfortunately much of which literature is not

empirically based (Beauchamp & Brooks, 2003, Gleeson et al., 1990, and Segall & Russell, 1992).

There are some limitations in the present study, one being that participants only represented two school districts. Although these districts were in two different Midwestern states, there may be differences across the country when it comes to placement trends. Further, research suggests that the type of twins, monozygotic versus dizygotic, influence parents and teachers' beliefs regarding placement (Segall & Russell, 1992), and unfortunately this difference was not investigated in the present study. Finally, this was a brief questionnaire of school counselors´ perception of school placement and more research is needed to better understand multiples, parents, and school personnel´s experience of multiples in the school system.

The results of this study have obvious implications for school counselors. First, school counselors must make themselves aware of school district and school building policies regarding the separation of twins and multiples as well as seek information to increase their knowledge regarding twins/multiples in the school setting. They should request in-service education regarding the emotional and academic impact of the placement of twins and multiples. Gaining such knowledge seems critical, as the present study showed that 77% of school counselors surveyed have had no training regarding the unique issues of twins and multiples.

Second, current research on twins and multiples suggest that placement decisions should fit the individual students involved and that one set policy cannot possibly take into account individual differences and needs. Hence, it seems important that school counselors, with their knowledge of mental health, serve as an advocate for

the children and consultant or mediator between school personnel and parents, especially in situations where there is a conflict regarding placement. Being able to provide school personnel, such as principals and teachers as well as parents, with updated and accurate data regarding classroom placement is an essential service that school counselors could provide.

As advocate for children, school counselors must help involve the children in the decision making when appropriate, as well as support their parents. Inclusion of parents in the decision making process regarding classroom placement is necessary, although it may not be standard behavior (Gleeson et al., 1990; Tully et al, 2003). The contemporary literature indicates that there are a variety of conflicting reasons to separate or not separate twins and multiples and, therefore, we recommend that a cadre of individuals, that is school counselors, parents, teachers, administrators and the multiples themselves, should be involved in the decision.

Third, once twins or multiples are placed in the classroom, counselors must serve as support for children and teachers. The emotional issues surrounding both placing multiples together and apart must be addressed on a long term basis to ensure proper school adjustment. Since the placement of twins and multiples can complicate the teaching process, it is imperative that counselors be a sounding board for teacher issues as well as a knowledge base regarding the emotional impact of either placement.

In conclusion, this article points to the need for more research regarding the placement of twins and multiples in the classroom as it seems to have significant implications for the children. Meanwhile, professional school counselors must take it upon themselves to become educated as to their individual school district policies and

about current research, and serve as advocates for families, children and teachers; all of whom may need guidance in this important and often difficult decision.

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