

**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 show 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. Yet, over 70% reported having no training on issues associated with twins and multiples in the school system. Implications for research and practice are addressed.

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

The rise of twin and multiple births (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, 2006). This steep climb of twins and multiple births has created a need to understand what happens when these children enter the school system, such as whether they have different experiences and challenges compared to singletons. For parents, a common concern is the decision about classroom placement, that is should their twins and/or multiples be separated or placed in the same classroom.

Although starting school is a developmental milestone for all children, it may require additional emotional support for twins and multiples if separated for the first time (Segal & Russell, 1992). Twins, especially monozygotic twins (identical twins), are often closely attached to each other (Rose, 2002) and may struggle with separation (Tully, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, Kiernan, & Andreou, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine school counselors' experience and beliefs regarding classroom placement of twins and multiples. Given the critical role that school counselors play in the schools in supporting the well being of students and consulting with school personnel and parents (Nugent, 2000), insight into their attitudes and knowledge about classroom placement of twins and multiples seems important. The literature review that follows discusses the current thoughts regarding classroom placement, parents' experience of this process, and data regarding the consequences of separating and keeping the children together in the classroom.

## Frequency and Reasons for Classroom Placement

Separating twins by classrooms appears to be common practice in the United States and abroad. One U.S. study indicated that 84% of twins were found to be in separate classrooms (Segall & Russell, 1992). In a large Australian study, there was a positive relationship between age and the percent of twins' separated. Whereas 29% were separated in first grade, approximately 60% were separated in grades three to six. 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, 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). Most decisions to separate the children tend to be 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; Gleeson et al., 1990). Another reason indicated for separating twins is to minimize the competition between them (Segal & Russell, 1992), potentially making teaching easier.

When asked to rank attributes among twins and multiples that gave reason for separation, teachers listed dependency/reliance, restrictions on each other's language and social maturity, and ability differences as the most common reasons. When asked the same question, 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 regarding staying together or not (Gleeson et al., 1990). Data also show that parents of monozygotic (identical) twins prefer common placement in early school years to a greater extent than parents of dizygotic (paternal) twins. This preference for common placement often has to do with parents wanting to provide their children with a sense of security while adjusting to a new situation (Segal & Russell, 1992).

### **Parents' Experience of Classroom Placement**

The decision regarding classroom placement can be challenging for parents and 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 one study, a third of parents reported never being consulted regarding their children's placement and 40% reported only rare consultations (Gleeson et al., 1990).

In actuality, it is not uncommon for parents of twins and multiples to have disputes with their children's schools regarding classroom placement and the desire to have their children remain in the same classroom. Of all the different social agencies and institutions that parents of twins and multiples encounter, they tend to have more arguments with the school system than with any other system or agency (Gleeson et al., 1990).

### **Consequences of Placement**

Only a few studies have been conducted that investigate the effect of separation of twins/multiples in school settings. In one study, parents indicated that a little over 30% of twins stayed unhappy for a period after being separated and that such

unhappiness was more common among monozygotic than dizygotic twins (Gleeson et al., 1990). In a longitudinal study in the 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 hyperactivity disorder, externalizing or pro-social behaviors.

However, compared to dizygotic twins, monozygotic twins that were separated showed more internalizing problems (e.g., withdrawn, anxious, depressed, and somatic). These problems also continued over time. Furthermore, monozygotic twins presented with more reading problems when separated. On the other hand, teachers indicated that separation seemed to benefit dizygotic twins in that they worked harder than when staying together (Tully et al., 2003).

In 2005, researchers in the Netherlands (van Leeuwen, van den Berg, van Beijsterveldt & Boomsma, 2005) replicated Tully et al.'s 2003 study. These findings supported that fact that separated twins experienced short-term internalization problems compared to non-separated twins. However, Tully et al.'s study also indicated greater internationalization problems among monozygotic twins compared to dizygotic twins, which were not found in van Leeuwen and colleagues study.

In summary, only a few empirical studies exist that can guide parents and school personnel regarding the classroom placement of twins and multiples; a decision that must be made by many parents and school staff each year. Given that school counselors serve an important role in supporting the well being of students through consultation with parents, teachers, and school administrators (Nugent, 2000)

knowledge of issues associated with classroom placement of twins and multiples seem important.

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to learn more about school counselors' attitudes and knowledge regarding twins/multiples' placement. Four areas of research questions guided our study: (a) do school counselors engage with parents of twins and multiples regarding classroom placements and do they know their schools and districts' policy regarding classroom placement of twins and multiples; (b) at what age do school counselors think twins and multiples should be separated and whom do they think should be involved in that decision; (c) are school counselors' trained in issues related to twins and multiples and do they have information available about classroom placements in their school; and (d) what are school counselors' beliefs about the potential consequences (positive and negative) for keeping twins and multiples together or apart in the classroom.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

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 Masters degree, 15% ( $n = 10$ ) indicated they had obtained an Education Specialist degree, and 12% ( $n = 7$ ) reported other (e.g., EdD, 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 to 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, gender, years of school counseling), information regarding school counselors' knowledge and attitudes regarding twins/multiples placement in the school setting were also requested. 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?). The participants were also asked to complete 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) What do you think are the potential psychological, social, and cognitive effects of separating twins and multiples? (d) What do you think are the potential psychological, social, and cognitive effects of keeping twins and multiples together in the same classroom?

## **Procedure**

Data were collected from two school districts. At one district, the data were gathered via an online survey submitted to all school counselors. In the other school district, surveys were submitted in paper forms to all school counselors. In the later district, surveys were also distributed and collected at a meeting. In both districts, calculated together, there were 99 school counselors, indicating that the response rate for the present study was 66%.



## Data Analysis

Two members of the research team (one faculty member and one doctoral 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 categories created.

## Results

### Involvement With Parents and Knowledge of Policy

The results show that most, 83% ( $n = 54$ ) 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. Less than half, 40% ( $n = 26$ ), reported having been in contact with parents regarding the classroom placement of their twins and multiples.

The participants were asked about their school district's and building policies regarding the placement of twins and multiples: 65% ( $n = 42$ ) 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 building's policy, 18 reported that the policy was to separate the children and two responded that parents were asked about their preference.

### **Age of Separation and Decision-Makers**

The participants were given six different age groups, such as 3-4 or 5-6, and were asked to mark at what age they believed it would be appropriate to separate twins and multiples in the classroom. Most, 40% ( $n = 26$ ), 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.

### **Training and Material**

In terms of graduate education and training regarding the 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 was available at their school 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.

### **Positive and Negative Consequences of Placement**

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 by stating that there was not 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 and nine did not respond at all. The answers of the 35 participants that responded to this questions were divided 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 the 42 participants that completed this questions 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, social, and cognitive consequences of separating twins or multiples in the classroom. In terms of separating the children, 17 participants completed this question. They 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.

Only 17 participants provided written responses to the question regarding positive and negative consequences of keeping the children together. Mostly negative consequences were reported 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, when the 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). It should be noted that none of the districts hold any clear policy about placement and leave the decision about placement to the individual principal and school.

The findings also revealed that most of the participants, 70%, believed that twins and multiples should be separated at an early age, between ages 3-6. 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 the 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; Segal & 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 want to 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 as available in their school regarding classroom 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; Segal & Russell, 1992), but there also seems to be a lack of training of school personnel that may encounter these children and their parents as well as material to help school personnel and staff with such decisions.

Although our results seem to reflect lack of knowledge and training in the areas of classroom placement on part of the participants, most seemed to favor separation. Separation was believed to enhance the children's development, identity, individuality, social skills and esteem, while keeping them together would stunt such social and psychological growth. Other reasons listed in support of separation included support of teachers and the classroom environment, with the belief that having twins and multiples together in the classroom may make it more difficult for teachers.

Although not all participants completed the qualitative questions, the responses of those who did mirror some of the erroneous beliefs about placement pointed out in contemporary literature (Beauchamp & Brooks, 2003, Gleeson et al., 1990, Segal & Russell, 1992). Yet, it should be noted that 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.

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 (Segal & 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 twins, multiples, parents, and school personnel's experience of these children in the school system.

The results of this study have obvious implications for school counselors. First, school counselors must make themselves aware of their school district and school building's 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.

It seems important that school counselors, with their knowledge of mental health, serve as advocates 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 advocates for children, school counselors must help involve parents and children in the decision making when appropriate. Inclusion of parents in the decision making process regarding classroom placement seems vital, 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, including school counselors, parents, teachers, administrators and the twins and multiples themselves, be involved in the decision. We also then recommend that each twin

pair/multiples is viewed as unique and the decision of placement is based on the unique circumstance of these children (Segal & Russell, 1992).

Once twins or multiples are placed in the classroom, school counselors must serve as support for children and teachers. The emotional issues surrounding both placing twins and 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 and concerns.

In summary, this exploratory study provides some initial data regarding school counselors' knowledge and attitudes about the classroom placements of twins and multiples in the school system. Clearly more research, policies, and training are needed to improve our services to this group of students. Meanwhile, we recommend school counselors take it upon themselves to become educated as to their school and district's policies as well as current research. Counselors must 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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