



Kindergarten Teachers Speak Out: "Too Much, Too Soon, Too Fast!"

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Abstract

This article presents results of a study of 229 kindergarten teachers who completed a survey designed to gather information about the current state of Michigan kindergartens. In addition to detailed data that reveals teachers' literacy instructional practices, teachers provided written responses to the following open-ended questions: What are the main issues facing kindergarten teachers? What, if anything, would make a difference in your ability to provide the type of program you would like to provide? What kind of professional development would be useful to kindergarten teachers? Teachers identified issues related to working conditions (time, class size, materials) and literacy instruction (autonomy for decision-making, developmental appropriateness of curriculum, student readiness, parental involvement in literacy, and professional development). Their patterns of response and vibrant words provide a window on the current kindergarten teaching experience and highlight the pull (or tensions) that many teachers experience in their instructional decision making because of the complex links between policy and practice. Implications for future policy makers and professional development based in principles of emergent literacy are discussed.

A colorful poster once greeted people at the door of my kindergarten classroom. Bold red font scripted the title: *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Pictures of smiling, playful children swinging, jumping rope, digging in a sandbox, building with blocks, and dressed for dramatic play formed a border that framed a poetic text:

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some... (Fulghum, 1989, p. 6-7)

It represented what I believed mattered most about the kindergarten experience for children. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, goals such as socializing in a diverse community, caring about ourselves and the environment, developing oral language, and loving to learn formed the heart of my half-day kindergarten program. According to our local curriculum guide, the onset of formal reading and writing instruction was the responsibility of the first-grade teacher. I did not plan guided reading groups or formal writing workshops yet all children made progress in literacy and some learned to read and write as a natural outcome of literacy activities embedded within a playful, inquiry-based context in my half-day program.

Today, the illustrations and words on that poster remind me of a bygone era in most public kindergartens. Snapshots of children and teachers in classrooms I visited within the past year would form different images. Where the dramatic play center once stood, children and their teachers might sit in small groups for reading instruction. Where children once stood around a sand or water table, boys and girls might sit at literacy and math centers, engaged in written tasks. Where kindergarteners once constructed make believe villages by creating towers and roads with blocks, children and their teacher may cluster around a table for guided reading groups or writing conferences. Children who once boarded the bus at the end of a half-day in school might stay for lunch and return to the classroom for the entire day. The purpose of this article is to highlight the nature and impact of some of these many changes in literacy instruction occurring in today's kindergarten classrooms.

No question—kindergartens have changed. Today's public school kindergarten programs have become increasingly more academic and less play-oriented. Teachers provide direct instruction to teach children how to read and to write prior to first grade. This shift affects kindergarten teachers, children, parents, caregivers, and preschool teachers in myriad ways. After a brief historical perspective of the escalating academic expectations for kindergarten, research is presented from a recent survey of kindergarten teachers, highlighting their voices as they define and respond to the issues that arise from shifts in kindergarten curricular expectations for literacy. The

article concludes with a discussion of the implications of this research and recommendations are made related to the issues voiced by kindergarten teachers.

Escalating Expectations

Kindergarten, a pivotal year in a child's continuous educational experience, represents the arrival of a relationship in which school becomes a significant partner with parents, childcare providers, and others involved in early learning experiences. Results from national and state research studies confirm its importance to the educational success of young children (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Research also affirms that learning to read in kindergarten correlates with academic success throughout school (Hanson & Farrel, 1995). Although early literacy professionals and researchers ascertain that kindergarteners benefit from research-based explicit reading instruction (McGill-Franzen, 2006), the debate about whether and how to teach reading in kindergarten continues. A recent surge in popularity of professional books that focus specifically on literacy instruction and assessment in kindergarten suggests that kindergarten literacy is in itself a prominent topic, and responds to the needs and interests of teachers and schools who are extending their kindergarten curricula to include reading and writing instruction (Bergen, 2008; Duncan, 2005; Kempton, 2007; McGee & Morrow, 2005; McGill-Franzen, 2006; Schulze, 2006; Wood-Ray & Glover, 2008).

Attention to and concern about kindergarten literacy instruction are not new (Joyce, Hrycauk, & Calhoun, 2003; Moyer, 1987). In fact, Smith & Shepherd (1988) identified how kindergartens had increased their academic expectations during the previous twenty years, since 1968. Their paper was inspired by changes toward more academic kindergarten curricula that were set in motion in the early 1980's, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The report pointed at mediocre school achievement and advocated for higher expectations, lest we sink in world status. Escalating expectations in higher grades trickled into primary grades and kindergartens, creating a focus on early academic success and causing educators to raise expectations in lower grades. Schools consequently raised their kindergarten curricular goals to reflect expectations of their more able students and set out to raise all children to those standards.

As schools responded with urgency to *A Nation at Risk* (1983), however, researchers and practitioners warned about the effects of escalating academic demands in kindergarten. Smith & Shepherd (1988) and Egertson (1987) noted that

a shift of first grade expectations into kindergarten resulted from current social trends: universal access to kindergarten, the day to day pressures that teachers felt from accountability policies, and pressure for higher academic achievement from middle class parents. Policies and practices such as raising the entrance age, readiness screening, and retaining children in kindergarten emerged. As a result, declines in time spent at recess and the arts, and increases in the use of workbook-based reviews and didactic practices, have become commonplace. They further reported that, although these policies intended to solve the problems of having high academic demands on children who were younger or unready, they also resulted in excluding some children from school and increased the emphasis on mathematics and literacy skills (Egertson, 1987; Shepherd, 1988).

Determining appropriate instructional methods for young children became the subject of research and debate when the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) issued its first position statement on the subject in 1987. Its wording suggested a dichotomous relationship between teacher-centered and child-centered practices. Likewise, the heart of the debate centered on whether teachers should use developmentally appropriate, child-centered practices, based in exploration and play, or didactic, teacher-centered practices, which tended to rely more exclusively on passive forms of instruction as well as drill-and-practice approaches. National concerns about kindergarten focused on the developmental appropriateness of what was being taught and how it was being taught, which led to the increasing use of transition kindergarten classes, readiness assessment, and retention (Bryant, Clifford, & Peisner, 1991; McGill-Franzen, 1992).

Since the early 1990's, the U.S. has experienced a dramatic increase in state and federal level policies related to early literacy, standards, and accountability. The turn of the century brought a surge of research on early literacy (Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Xue & Meisels, 2004) and extensive attention from the U.S. Department of Education directed toward early reading (No Child Left Behind, 2001; Reading First, 2002). How the current period of high-stakes testing and accountability is transforming the nature of schooling in the United States is at the forefront of educational criticism and debate (Allington, 2002; Goodman, 2006). Policy mandates, political rhetoric, curricular programs, and public sentiment all have influenced instructional practice and student outcomes (Xue & Miesels, 2004). Kindergarten has, through escalating federal, state, and local attention, increasingly become a target for educational change and is now considered a tool for narrowing the achievement gap.

Furthermore, pressure to achieve builds, as students who perform poorly on standardized tests face the possibility of retention, and low-scoring schools may lose funding and their accreditation as an outcome of No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation. While formally reported testing typically targets students in grades 3-12, early childhood and primary school teachers often feel under the gun to get children "ready" for the next grade and the ensuing standardized tests. Increasingly, schools have changed to full day kindergarten programs to address these issues (Clark, 2001; Villegas, 2005). External factors, such as pressure from upper grades teachers and curriculum constraints within a school district, coupled with teachers' own beliefs and practices, also shape the environment that young children experience in the primary grades (Sacks & Mergendoller, 1997).

Although a strong base of research on early literacy development and debate about appropriate practices has continued during past decades (Karweit, 1992; Vecchotti, 2003), relatively little research exists about *the kindergarten teacher's experience* during an era of increasing standards and accountability. In 1992, researchers from the University of Vermont conducted a study with that purpose (Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). Through a survey of approximately 500 Vermont kindergarten teachers, the researchers found that the majority of the teachers felt that the emphasis in kindergarten should be play, affective development, and activities selected by the children. While nearly all of the respondents thought that kindergarten teachers should encourage children to explore building materials like Legos and blocks and facilitate explorations with sand and water, fewer than 14% thought that teachers should involve all children in formal reading instruction or group students for instruction. A majority of the teachers reported that the only literacy activities they used more than three times weekly were teacher read-alouds and language experience charts. In addition, researcher observations in randomly selected kindergarten classrooms corroborated that, even where teachers reported literacy instructional practices, little observable actual reading or writing *instruction* existed (Lipson et al., 1994).

Two Decades Later: The Current Study

With guidance from their research team, the Lipson et al.'s (1994) kindergarten survey was revised to reflect current trends in early literacy instruction and was mailed to kindergarten teachers in both Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Gallant, 2007). As with the prior study, the

researchers wanted to provide a window into current kindergarten literacy instructional practices, identify issues of importance to kindergarten teachers, and plan appropriate professional development in literacy from the teachers' perspectives. The eight-page survey addressed program and teacher demographics, teachers' beliefs about teaching literacy, their use of literacy materials and literacy instructional practices, their instructional priorities, and sources of influence on their instruction. Results provided longitudinal information about trends in literacy instruction and materials used in Vermont kindergartens during the past 20 years, as well as current practices in Michigan schools. Results affirm that research on early literacy, and/or the push to influence instruction through standards, assessment, and grade level expectations, is changing the kindergarten experience for students and teachers.

Although no longitudinal data exists from Michigan teachers, their responses on the recent survey aligned closely with those of Vermont teachers. Literacy materials and instructional practices not present 20 years ago in Vermont are now prominent in both states. At least 75% of the teachers reported the presence of materials typically used for explicit reading instruction—big books, charts, decodable books and leveled texts. They also reported the frequent use of phonics workbooks and worksheets (46%)—a dramatic change from 1992 in Vermont, when only 2.6% of teachers felt it was appropriate to provide seatwork or workbook activities (Lipson et al., 1994). Teachers reported that they used shared reading, guided reading, shared writing, teacher read-alouds, journals, and literacy centers in over 75% of the classrooms at least three times weekly, confirming that explicit reading and writing instruction is prevalent in today's kindergartens. This contrasts significantly with the 1992 study, when literacy materials and formal reading instruction were not necessarily a prominent part of the daily kindergarten curriculum. The preponderance of specific literacy practices now reported by teachers reveals a shift away from child-centered pedagogy, towards a more curriculum-based approach (Gehsmann et al., 2005).

Additional data, however, revealed teachers' frustration with this change (Gallant, 2007; Gehsman, et al., 2005; Woodside-Jiron, Gehsmann, & Gallant, 2006). In addition to the quantitative components of the survey, teachers were asked open-ended questions related to professional development, developmentally appropriate practice, and issues confronting kindergarten teachers, offering opportunities for teachers to use their own words to raise issues or offer information not addressed in prior questions. Again, Vermont and Michigan teachers raised similar issues

(Gehsmann et al., 2005). In this paper, the voices of Michigan kindergarten teachers who responded to these survey questions are presented:

- What do you see as the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers in the area of literacy?
- What, if anything, would make a difference in your ability to provide the type of program you would like to provide?
- What are three areas of professional development from which you think kindergarten teachers would benefit?

Context

Surveys, postpaid return envelopes, and explanatory letters were mailed to public elementary school principals in six Michigan counties, requesting that they distribute the surveys and letters to kindergarten teachers. Fifty-two percent of the principals distributed them to their teachers. Based on the principals' responses, approximately 500 Michigan kindergarten teachers received the surveys with 229 being actually completed and returned to the researchers. Although teachers identified their school districts on the survey, their responses were anonymous and the data were not disaggregated by school district for analysis. The six counties broadly-surveyed (Genesee, Lapeer, Oakland, Saginaw, Shiawassee, Tuscola) vary in population, diversity, and socioeconomics. The numbers of surveys returned from each county were somewhat proportionate to the county population.

Approximately one half of the schools represented in the survey reported that they offer exclusively half-day sessions. Twenty-three percent offer only full-day kindergarten, and 27 % reported varied scheduling configurations. Thirteen percent reported multi-age groupings that included kindergarten. Sixty-five percent of the teachers reported that more than half of their students had participated in early education programs. Michigan children who attain the chronological age of five years by December 1 may enter kindergarten that prior September. Recent legislation has been introduced to raise the entrance date to June 1 and to make full-day kindergarten mandatory.

Participants

Teacher respondents reported a range of teaching experience from 1 to 38 years, with an average of 15 years of teaching experience. The average number of years respondents reported teaching kindergarten was nine. Over two-thirds of the teachers hold a masters level degree, 96% hold an elementary education

endorsement, 64% a ZA endorsement (early childhood specialization), and 18% a reading endorsement.

Using a 5-point Likert scale, teachers responded to a series of 24 statements designed to measure their beliefs about what constitutes best practice. The statements reflected issues related to structure (child-centered or systems-directed orientation) and theories of learning (maturationist, behaviorist, or interactionist view). Surveys were designed and analyzed using a cluster analysis method to determine teacher beliefs related to their practices (Lipson et al., 1994). Teachers most frequently reported (80-97%) that they believed that they should provide children with open-ended materials and experiences, encourage building with Legos and blocks, design the classroom for problem solving, expect children to be motivated if the curriculum is appropriate, and make teaching decisions based on children's abilities and interests. Beliefs that were *least* often reported (12-34%) included involving children in whole class activities for most of the day, waiting for indicators of child's maturational readiness to learn before making reading materials available, basing judgments on completion of behavior objectives, using prizes, rewards, or competitions to motivate children, and providing workbook or seatwork activity. These responses indicate that the beliefs of the Michigan kindergarten teachers who completed the survey tend to reflect a more child-centered orientation and an interactionist view of the learning process.

When Beliefs and Mandates Collide

Analysis

More than half of the teachers wrote lengthy, passionate responses to a prompt that asked them to identify major issues confronting kindergarten teachers in the area of literacy. A constant comparative thematic analysis was conducted on the participants' written responses (Seale 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After transcribing the responses into files organized by county geographic location, responses were coded individually, creating labels for categories. Labels were compared and two overall categories were found: issues related to working conditions and issues related to literacy instruction. After sorting the responses into those two categories and an initial content analysis, the researchers agreed on the most prevalent themes. Tables were created to make comparisons within each theme more visible (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and responses were coded individually for placement in those

categories. Lists were compared, differences discussed and agreement was reached about the placement of those few on which we differed, creating one table for each theme. To present the results, selected direct quotes from their written responses are presented to convey the voices and to represent the types and range of responses.

Issues Related to Working Conditions

When Michigan teachers responded to the question that asked what would make a difference in their abilities to provide the type of programs they would like to provide, they emphatically expressed frustration with increasing academic expectations, and raised issues related to working conditions and resources: instructional time, class size, the need for additional adult support in the classroom, and availability of materials.

Teachers voiced a sense of responsibility for teaching kindergarteners more in less time. Their responses across districts highlighted inequities in the amount of classroom time to which kindergarteners have access. Teachers of full day programs (23% of respondents) noted they feared their programs would be reduced to half day, due to the state's waning economy. Teachers of half-day programs and other configurations expressed frustration and pressure because they were expected to address the same curricular goals and achieve the same student outcomes as those who teach in full day programs. Almost unanimously, teachers in programs that were less than full days declared the need for more instructional time to address the rise in curricular demands, and lamented that there was little time for exploration and play. For example, some teachers noted the following:

- Half days are way too limiting based on current State Benchmarks and Standards. Kindergarten should be a full day and mandatory. If I had all-day kindergarten, I could teach more appropriately and fulfill school's curriculum without cramming information down these young children! I am trying to teach a full-time curriculum in a part-time program.
- I teach half-day kindergarten. I always find it difficult to teach everything I would like to teach in our short day. I am not sure if all-day kindergarten is the answer. I would like an extended day - I always feel like I am rushing the children.
- Too much curriculum to cover in too little time! Standardized tests are putting pressure into the lower grades to drop "play" and replace it with more "sit down" work and worksheets to prove learning. If I had

all-day kindergarten, I could teach more appropriately and fulfill curriculum without cramming info down these young children.

- The one thing that would make a difference would be more time with the students. An all-day, everyday kindergarten program is needed to give the children more time to play and learn. Too much of our day is spent on required curriculum. The children need time to play with materials so they fully understand the concepts presented.
- In half the time (3 hours) we are expected to teach the letters, sounds, reading (and administer DRA) and writing. Not to mention math, science, and social studies has to fit into our day. It is very difficult to have the kindergarten day become more academic. There is less time for playtime - unstructured.

Teachers reported kindergarten class sizes ranging from 13-31 students with over 75% indicating class sizes between 24 and 29. Several teachers suggested that capping class sizes to 20 students or less would make a difference in allowing them to address the broad range of developmental differences and the increasing curricular expectations. Related to the issue of class size, teachers expressed a need for additional adult support (i.e., paraprofessionals, literacy specialists, psychologists, social workers) to address student needs. Some voiced the following concerns:

- With my 27 4.5 to 6-year-olds, so much time is spent on social skills, appropriate school behaviors and expectations and classroom management. The progressive curriculum & grade-level expectations from state and district levels do not consider or allow for developmental differences. It only makes sense. If there are less students in each class, the teacher has more time for small groups and individual needs.
- Our classes are too large. You cannot provide enough individual support with 30 children in your class. Our children come to us with very little background knowledge, language concerns, and behavior problems. It is extremely difficult to move them ahead as fast and as far as the state expects.
- I need more classroom support- a teaching assistant assigned full-time to my classroom. It enables the teacher to work at greater intensity with at-risk children. This was the case in prior years. Kindergarten assistants were cut from our programs this year. A major mistake!

- Our program has a lot of strengths, being an all-day, 5-day-a-week kindergarten. Our program would be stronger with reading instruction for all levels and abilities and having support staff incorporated into every classroom (Reading groups: teacher w/small group, para w/small group).
- More involvement of specialists in the building (i.e. psychologist for evaluation of individual strengths & weaknesses of students who are not making expected progress. A social worker to work with students and families in need. Additional "certified" support for at-risk students and literacy specialists would make a difference).

Although with less emphasis than their impassioned comments about time and class size, the issue of a need for more instructional materials warrants attention. More than half of the teachers reported a lack of materials to address curricular expectations, and felt that access to more and better instructional materials would help them to provide the type of program they want. This need for better materials is a resource issue that, of course, directly affects literacy instruction as they noted:

- I would like more materials. I spend a great deal of my own money in order to make learning fun in my classroom.
- I would also like to see more literacy resources available to kindergarten teachers: big books, leveled readers, trade books, appropriate library materials. Many resources are for grades 1 and 2. The foundations of literacy start now in kindergarten!
- I need more developmentally appropriate materials for hands-on activities and centers in the classroom.

Issues Related to Literacy Instruction

Their responses related to literacy instruction revealed concerns about their decreasing autonomy to make curricular decisions, tension between imposed curricular changes and what they perceived as developmentally appropriate practices, readiness levels of students who enter kindergarten, and the need for parental involvement in literacy activities outside of school. With increased academic expectations, they expressed a need for professional development to teach literacy more effectively, and identified the types of professional development that would be helpful.

Teachers ranked their perceived levels of flexibility or autonomy in daily curricular decisions on a 5-point scale from “very much” to “almost none.” Fifty-nine percent reported that they had “much” or “very much” flexibility. Over 40 percent of the respondents, however, reported a low level of flexibility in making curricular decisions. This contrasts significantly with the 1992 study in Vermont, in which 95% of the teachers reported total autonomy over their programs (Lipson et al., 1994). Teachers frequently used words like *required* and *forced* when they described their current roles. Some raised questions about the qualifications of the policy makers who are making the decisions about the kindergarten curriculum and noted the following pressures these curricular decisions have on their young students:

- We’re being required to do so much more assessing and teaching of academics and moving away from all the other aspects of kindergarten. My kindergarten of today is what first grade used to be just a few years ago.
- Kindergarten curriculum has been forced to become too academic in order to prepare for state tests. Now kindergarten students are expected to enter first grade reading and writing to some degree. This is too much pressure to put on such young children. We should be able to explore and play with language without forcing students to unlock the door to reading and writing a complex language.
- Why are educators forced to be driven by people in power with no educational background? Why can’t we as educators take back our profession and do what is best for the whole child? Who is making grade level expectation policy, and why aren’t early childhood educators involved?
- I would have the Michigan Benchmarks and District benchmarks re-written. This second try would include teachers already using developmentally appropriate practice who would work alongside early childhood experts to come up with realistic expectations for young students.

In another survey question, again using a 5-point Likert scale from most to least influential, teachers ranked and reported the extent to which various sources have been influential in determining the way they teach kindergarten children. These sources included administration of programs, the context of education, children, educational practices, colleagues, professional preparation, and experience.

The following sources of influence were ranked either "most influential" or "considerably influential:" state and federal mandates (78%), availability of materials (78%), children's preschool experiences (73%), first grade expectations (72%), classroom-based tests (67%), changes in the teaching profession (67%), societal changes in the family (66%), graduate courses (62%), and professional literature (58%). The lowest ranked influences were local boards of education (24%), superintendents (26%), special mentors (39%), undergraduate courses (33%), and teacher evaluations (43%).

Given the preponderance of self-reported child-centered, interactionist beliefs among our respondents, and their expressed stress from external pressures on their autonomy to make curricular decisions, it is not surprising that teachers spoke more frequently and passionately about the tension between curricular changes and developmentally appropriate practice than any other issue. They frequently voiced their perceptions that the literacy curriculum was being "pushed down" and that young children were asked to do "too much." Although 2 of the 229 teachers voiced that the state standards and benchmarks were achievable by most of their students, all other respondents described them as developmentally inappropriate for many kindergarten students and a source of pressure for both students and teachers. In responses related to this issue, teachers raised red flags about the long-term effects of escalating expectations on children:

- Some students are just not ready for all of this info/skills we are pushing at them right now. I hope we're not burning them out at too early of an age. It will be interesting to see where and how these students are doing 10-15 years from now!
- Curriculum is being pushed down. Just because a child may be able to accomplish something (by being pushed by a teacher) doesn't mean he/she should. When learning takes place in one's "own time" the event is more meaningful and less stressful on the child. The kids can only take so much. But we have to push to reach our objectives.
- I am so glad that someone is taking a look at what kindergarteners are now being required to do. Children are losing their childhood too soon. I hope this helps legislators and others see that childhood is being lost. Children are capable of doing so much, but the very fun of being a kid is being lost.

- Too much, too soon, too fast! There will be a cost to all of this push down curriculum. I am already seeing children with anxiety disorders.
- I really struggle with developmentally appropriate teaching and the progressive, curriculum-driven expectations of my district and the state! Children are not allowed to be children anymore with such high expectations (What used to be first and second-grade creative writing skills are now expected of kindergarteners). We don't have time for large motor activities, dramatic play, and centers every day, which I believe is necessary at this young age. It's sad that we are accountable to teach the curriculum that is not appropriate for 4 and 5-year-olds.

Related to their concerns about the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum, teachers expressed concerns that kindergarteners enter school with a broad spectrum of readiness levels, often depending on the socioeconomic status of the community. Within these comments about readiness, the theme of long-term effects on students' self-efficacy also emerged. Some suggested changing the school entry dates and noted the connection between parental involvement and readiness:

- Children are coming to school with fewer skills and yet expectations that they will read in kindergarten is a given. It is just not happening in high-risk communities.
- Many students, because of their backgrounds, are not developmentally ready for what is expected because of state and federal mandates. Many children feel defeated at an early age. As a result, more feel like failures and eventually qualify for special education and or support services. Once someone feels like a failure, it's difficult to convince him or her otherwise.
- Too many children begin kindergarten too young to meet the demands of them today. The State of Michigan needs to change the entry age. I believe a June 1st cut off date instead of December 1st would be best. I have students that are 4 for the entire first semester. Our expectations have changed. We expect children to be able to read & write coming out of kindergarten. Many of these young children are unsuccessful in these areas because they are not developmentally ready. This lowers their confidence in their abilities, and, I believe, affects them throughout their education.

- More and more kindergarteners have not been read to. They seem to have fewer experiences such as going to museums, concerts, plays, or trips to see free things in their communities. They do not play interactive games (board games or card games). Too many individual activities (computer, television, Gameboy).
- Many families/parents are not reading to children. Lack of time families have for children, inconsistent family dynamics/structures, the number of students who go between different homes, caregivers, one or both parents do not live with them on a consistent basis – all this is staggering. We need to teach all students, but this does make it more difficult.

Many teachers raised the issue of professional development when asked what would help them offer the type of program they wished to provide. The survey also asked teachers in a separate question to list three areas of professional development from which they would benefit. They listed some general topics: early childhood training, understanding child development and milestones, working with parents, classroom management, time management, classroom organization, behavior management, motivation, working with at-risk students and struggling readers, developmentally appropriate instruction, learning through structured play, differentiating instruction, selecting materials, making materials, integration of content areas, small motor skills and movement, and technology.

They also identified topics related especially to literacy instruction that reflect current approaches to literacy instructional programs and content: balanced literacy approach, guided reading, grouping for literacy instruction, shared reading, developmental writing techniques, interactive writing, writer's workshop for kindergarteners, literacy centers (development and implementation), phonics instruction, phonemic awareness instruction and development, and using children's literature, language acquisition, brain-based learning, and literacy assessment techniques. Some teachers requested training and information directly related to state and national initiatives: "Playful Literacy" training, how NCLB affects kindergarten, appropriate practices for NCLB and state goals, instructional activities for Grade Level Content Expectations, and how to develop appropriate lessons and centers for teaching benchmarks and standards.

Within their lists, many requested professional development in which they could spend time exclusively with other kindergarten teachers to share best

instructional practices, have group discussions about topics of importance to them, and for collaboration. Several noted that they would benefit from observations in other kindergarten classrooms and that they prefer attending conferences and workshops that relate specifically to kindergarten age children and best teaching practices for kindergarten. This suggests a view that kindergarten teaching practices fall into a separate category than those of first grade and above.

Conclusion

Kindergarten is an important policy issue. A child's access to kindergarten, and ultimately the level of resources and initiatives available, depends on residency within a particular state, school district, or local school. This study reveals great variability in the delivery of kindergarten programs: the unequal provision of half and full day programs, the number of children served in classrooms, and the school-based assistance that children receive from adults other than the teacher. Inequities related to access and instructional time exist in kindergartens that do not exist at any other grade level in our schools. Despite the differences in the provision and structure of kindergarten programs across individual schools, the rigorous standards and assessment policies of recent years apply to all kindergartens, regardless of the amount of time children have access to instruction. These differences need to be analyzed more deeply in terms of school context and socioeconomic status and the barriers to solving these problems need to be identified and resolved.

But the teachers' voices reveal more than policy issues. Kindergarten classrooms and teachers are in flux. In this era of accountability, marked by articulated rigorous state and national literacy standards and high-stakes literacy testing pushed down into the third grade, it is not surprising to learn from kindergarten teachers that tension about student performance flows into the kindergarten and influences practice. Teachers note that an emphasis on reading and writing instruction is now rapidly supplanting a former focus on socialization, play, and exploration, and that they are struggling to address these changes. Teachers are worried about their students getting "too much, too soon, too fast" in kindergarten, and raise red flags about both the immediate and long term emotional and academic consequences to our young children.

Although this is cause for great concern, what also of the professional and emotional consequences for kindergarten teachers? Their written remarks indicate that they feel disempowered and pushed by administrators to improve kindergarteners'

literacy performance. They warn that the standards they are required to attain do not consider children's varied abilities and styles and are often developmentally inappropriate, and they are asked to work contrary to their own beliefs. What might happen to professionals who feel less empowered and more stressed in their jobs? The level of job satisfaction for kindergarten teachers is likely to diminish. If even a smaller percentage of kindergarten teachers feel disgruntled and disempowered than this study suggests, the quality of the kindergarten experience for both teachers and children may decline. We need to listen to and support our kindergarten teachers. Their voices matter because they are at the heart of the experience for children.

Are these changes "too much, too soon, too fast" for teachers? Teachers' written comments at the end of some surveys indicated a feeling of isolation and being left behind:

- It is nice to know that someone else is concerned about kindergarten! Everyday more is being handed down to us and I worry that students and teachers are feeling the pressure. I hope you gain a lot of information from this survey, and I hope that superintendents along with principals take a close look at the results. Thanks for asking... Sure wish there was a coalition to stop the runaway train of kindergarten being 1st and 2nd grade!

This quote represents a theme that permeates a majority of their responses: kindergarten has become like first grade. The academic expectations to read and write have increased, schools are increasing from half-day to full-day programs, and entrance age criteria may be raised to exclude the youngest of those who currently can attend.

Teachers in this study seem to hold the notion that children need to be "ready" for kindergarten, that they need to get kindergarteners "ready" for first grade and "ready" for tests, and that kindergarten should be dramatically different than first grade. They even suggest unique professional development, apart from teachers of other grades. Why? Their statements are grounded in a readiness perspective, rather than an *emergent literacy* perspective (Clay, 1966; 1975; Teale, 1986). An emergent literacy perspective assumes that children acquire some knowledge about language, reading, and writing prior to entering school. From this perspective, teachers accept children at whatever level of literacy they are functioning, and provide a program based on the individual strengths of the child. The grade level distinctions in instruction would not be rigid. Why would we do this differently in

kindergarten than in first grade? The idea is not for the child to be ready. They are already ready (Wood-Ray & Glover, 2008).

Surveyed teachers expressed the idea of “developmentally appropriate” through a readiness perspective. They conveyed a strong sense that current practices are not developmentally appropriate for students who are not at a certain level of readiness. Educators who embrace an emergent literacy perspective, however, would be less concerned with school entrance dates and levels of readiness, and more concerned with providing *continuous* instruction across grade levels based on children’s strengths. Kindergarten teachers who hold an emergent literacy perspective would also not see a need for professional development that is separate from other primary grades.

Most teachers who responded to the survey perceived a dichotomy between play/exploration and reading and writing instruction – as if one excludes the other. This perception can be changed by new information that is grounded in an emergent literacy perspective. Well-planned professional development grounded in emergent literacy theories and research can help teachers plan instruction in which children can achieve literacy standards through research-based instructional strategies that capitalize on children’s penchant for learning through exploration, play, and social interaction. 

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