FLUKING KINDERGARTEN:  
ESCAPING CURRICULUM  
LEAVES MANY BEHIND

BY LORRIE A. SHEPARD AND MARY LEE SMITH

NEXT YEAR Michael Lee will repeat kindergarten because his teacher assessed him as not meeting the criteria for readiness for first grade. His teacher reported that he is unable to follow directions, is unable to concentrate, and has difficulty with fine-motor tasks. He is judged by his teacher to be not ready for the academic rigors of kindergarten.

In our society, the decision to repeat kindergarten is made by the school district and is based on the teacher's judgment of the child's readiness for first grade. The decision is not based on standardized tests, but rather on the teacher's assessment of the child's academic and social skills.

An extra year in kindergarten can have significant negative effects on a child's academic and social development. Children who are retained in kindergarten are more likely to have difficulty with reading, writing, and math, and are more likely to experience social and emotional problems. They are also more likely to experience negative self-esteem and low self-confidence.

The decision to repeat kindergarten is a difficult one for parents and teachers. It is important to consider the child's readiness for first grade, as well as the potential negative effects of repeating kindergarten. It is important to ensure that the child is ready for first grade before making the decision to repeat kindergarten.

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extra year to grow, their children will move to the top of their class and become leaders. Research evidence from controlled studies does not support this claim.

How could there be such a discrepancy between research findings and the practical experience of many teachers who watch children blossom and grow during their transition year? For example, a study conducted by Dr. Judith Ford in Norman, Okla., is often cited by the Gesell Institute to support its advocacy of extra-year programs. During their year in transition class, the 27 children in the Norman program gained an average of 53 percentile points on the Metropolitan Readiness Test. Thus, children who were in the bottom half of their class at the end of one year of kindergarten were remarkably more ready after an extra year, now with readiness scores more like those of their more mature peers who had gone directly onto first grade.

Though many cite findings such as these as convincing, this study is fatally flawed. As is typical of studies cited by transition advocates, the Norman study had no control groups, which would have been critical in determining what those children would have been like if they had not been promoted rather than retained or placed in transition. Nor were children in the Norman study followed up in first grade. Studies with control groups consistently show that gain such as these in readiness do not persist into the next grade. Eventually children end up at approximately the same percentile rank compared to their new grade peers as they would have had they stayed with their age peers. Younger or at-risk students who are promoted perform equally well in first grade.

Kindergarten teachers, however, are generally unaware of these end results. They know only that the retained children are doing better than they did in their first year of kindergarten. In the short run, teachers see progress: longer attention spans, better compliance with classroom rules, and success with paper-and-pencil tasks that were a struggle the year before. Furthermore, many of the transition children are above average achievers in their first grade class (but, unseen by their teachers, so are an equal number of the retained control children). Some of the transition children are still acting out and doing poorly with worksheets (as are an equal number of control children). After retention has been tried and children are a year older than their classmates, disruptive behaviors thus were once thought to be signs
of immaturity are now seen as relatively enduring personality traits.

For these few transitory academic benefits, retained children pay with a year of their lives. And, they understand that they could not go on with their classmates because of something that was wrong with them. Many educators believe there is no stigma attached to kindergarten retention, especially if it is "handled properly" by parents. Many especially deny that transition placement—which has a different name and does not involve recycling of curriculum—could be harmful. But children know that they are not making normal progress in the same way they know the meaning of placement in the bluebird reading group. One little girl understood the meaning of her pre-5 placement so well that she thought she would also need to go to pre-second before second grade, and pre-third, and so on.

Our conclusion that kindergarten retention is traumatic and disruptive for children is based on interviews at the end of the kindergarten year. Children of parents with previous experience in other countries were interviewed at that time. The majority of parents said that retention was the best decision they could have made, or at least they were not disappointed with their choice. A number of parents also reported significant negative emotional effects associated with the retention. The apparent contradiction was created by the substantial group in the middle who reported both positive and negative experiences.

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The following quotations typify the ambivalent feelings of parents who gave a positive "vote" to the program but revealed an undercurrent of regret.

I knew he was struggling and he knew that he wasn't doing as well as the other kids were doing so I thought this was right, He's OK now. He does refer back once in a while. He says, "If I had made it through kindergarten, I would be in second grade instead of first.

Well, the only [problem] was that he wasn't going to be going with the rest of his class into the next grade. But it was only a story. I told him that he was so special that his teacher wanted to keep him.

I think the biggest drawback is the attitude of other children and adults. Now as much from the teachers but parents of other children remarking on how he looks so much older, "he should be here," "he should be there," and other children picking up on the fact that he was going to remain in kindergarten, giving him a hard time about that.

I think it was more of a social thing. It was really hard to explain to her that her friends would be going on and she would be the only one left behind. That was the hardest part of it. I think it helped her more than it hindered her.

(persuaded her) that we've held her back and she has the possibility of being a little closer to the top than being a grade ahead and being at the very bottom. Some of the negative aspects of it are her own problems dealing with it and saying that she's been back.

Kindergarten retention is similar in many respects to tracking and special education placements for mild learning problems. The logic of placing instruction tailored to individual learning needs is admirable, but research has not confirmed the efficacy of separate placements. Instead, research has documented negative side effects such as social stigma, lowered self-esteem, and watered-down instruction. From findings in these other literatures it is possible to speculate about way kindergarten retention does not produce the expected boost in academic achievement. For example, in a review of research on ability grouping, Robert Slavin found that homogeneously tracked classrooms are ineffective but that within-class groupings do improve learning. He reasoned that within-class grouping for each subject provides a closer fit between student learning and instruction than does a one-time assignment to separate classes on the basis of ability. Similarly, we might reason that kindergarten retention is a more useful and effective way to individualize instruction because it requires less 12-month dislocation. Children who are judged to be unready for one month are treated the same as those who are 12 months behind; a child who seems immature in only one area of development is treated the same as a child who shows developmental lags in all areas of development.

Kindergarten retention also resembles tracking and special education placement in that a disproportionate number of minority children are selected for extra-year placements. Thus, children who most rely on public education for the opportunity to learn are segregated from their peers on the basis of prior learnings. Tests used to determine readiness are not sufficiently accurate to make their use for extra-year placements defensible. For example, Kaufman and Kaufman have provided the only reliability data on the widely used Gesell School Readiness Test. They found a standard error of measurement equivalent to six months, meaning that a child measured to be four and one-half years old developmentally and unready for school could very likely be five and fully ready. Although various readiness tests are correlated with later school performance, predictive validities for all available tests are low enough that 50 to 50 percent of more of children said to be unready will be falsely identified.

Over the long term, kindergarten retention has a final negative consequence. Children who are over age for their grade have a marked likelihood of dropping out of school. The Association of California Urban School Districts reported that children failed in their first two years of school have substantially reduced chances of completing high school. When background
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Factors and achievement are taken into account, children who have been retained or are otherwise over age for their grade are 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out. These findings hold true in both rich and poor school districts.

The current fail to funnel children in kindergarten is the product of inappropriate curriculum. Over the past 20 years there has been a persistent escalation of academic demand in kindergarten and first grade. What were formerly next grade expectations are shoved downward into the lower grade. In a recent survey, 18 percent of principals reported that it is district policy to teach reading to all kindergartners; an additional 50 percent of schools teach reading to kindergartners who are "ready and able," 85 percent of elementary principals say that academic achievement in kindergarten has medium or high priority in their schools.

In a forthcoming article for the Elementary School Journal, a document the societal factors behind the escalation: universal availability of kindergartens, per- variances of preschool, and Sesame Street. If everyone has had kindergarten, then first grade teachers assume as prerequisites those letters sounds that previously were taught in first grade. If kindergartners already know their letters from Big Bird, then they must be taught something more, or so the argument goes. In addition, our interviews with teachers reveal more immediate sources of pressure: accountability gates in later grades and demands from middle-class parents that children move faster and faster along the track of pre-readers and graded workbooks. Schools with high rates of retention in kindergarten are characterized by an "accountability culture." Promotional gates at third grade or sixth grade are translated downward into fixed requirements for the end of first grade. If a first grade teacher is visited by the principal and reprimanded for any child who is below national norms on standardized tests, this teacher in turn communicates to the kindergarten teacher an unwillingness to accept children for first grade who are not ready to read.

Kindergarten teachers also describe the demands imposed by parents. Many middle-class parents visit school and convey that their only criterion for judging a teacher's effectiveness is her success in advancing their child's reading achievements. They ignore other evidence of enriching experience and cognitive development. "My child was reading when he came to school. You haven't taught him a thing." What counts for many parents is the number of first grade primers completed in kindergarten because this is a clearly quantifiable measure of progress, like an SAT score for a five-year-old. More academics borrowed from the next grade is not necessarily better learning. A dozen national organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the International Reading Association, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals, have issued position statements decrying the negative effects of narrow focus on literacy and numeracy in the earliest grades. Long hours of drill-and-practice on isolated skills are detrimental to all children, even those who are able to meet the demands, because tiny, boring, and seriously underachieving by age 8 are substituted for conceptual understanding and enthusiasm for learning. Highly formalized activities that occur too early deprive children of time to learn from play, substitute inappropriate symbolic learning for manipulative learning, detach reading from normal language development, stifle natural exploration, and increase stress.

Many kindergarten teachers acknowledge that extra-year programs would not be necessary if children were being sent on to a more flexible, child-centered first grade. But faced with what they expect will be a punishing experience for the child (and holding generally rosy opinions about the effects of retention), keeping the child in the safety of kindergarten is clearly preferred. Educators do not express awareness, however, that the practice of retention might actually contribute to the escalation of curriculum. The more that unready children are screened out of school or put in pre-K, the more that kindergarten becomes a place for six-year-olds. Teachers naturally adjust what they teach to the level of the children in their class. If many of the children are older and reading, teachers do not continue to teach as if the room were filled with five-year-olds. Likewise, as more and more "unready" children are removed, first grade becomes a place for seven-year-olds, and instruction is paced accordingly. The subtle adjustment of curriculum expectations to the capabilities of an older, faster-moving group can be demonstrated in the research literature on school entrance ages. Each time a district or state raises the cutoff date for school entry, the hope is to eliminate the youngest children who seem unready for school. In a very short time, instruction is adjusted to the new range and a new youngest group appears inadequate.

One alternative to escalation, retention, and more escalation can be found in the schools we observed that practiced virtually no kindergarten retention. Instead of highly strict curricula, strict promotion standards, and an insistence that teachers adhere rigidly to the authorized curriculum rather than exercising their creativity, these schools had developed a culture where teachers and principal shared a commitment to adapting curriculum and instructional practices to a wide range of individual differences. They were able to manage heterogeneity without the need to
Our observations indicated that the non-retention schools were neither richer nor poorer than those schools with rigid grade-level expectations; nor did they serve less diverse populations. It should also be noted that the more flexible and individualized arrangements in the non-retention schools did not come at the expense of higher standards. The average standardized achievement test scores for third graders in these schools were no different from those in the high-retaining schools that had become preoccupied with the accountability tests.

When these research findings are presented to groups of educators across the country, we are told that all of our conclusions are credible except the implication that current practices can be changed. A kindergarten teacher stands up in the audience and gives us another account of what will happen to children who cannot keep pace in first grade. In a workshop for first-grade teachers the story is told of the principal who visits each May, tests scores in hand, seeking an explanation as to why several of the children are not above national norms. In a state conference of elementary principals, the principals point to their superintendents, who post standardized test scores by school. As long as each group feels powerless to intervene and persists in practices that contribute to the problem, the problem will get worse. More and more children like Michael Lee in Georgia will be told, in one of their earliest encounters with schooling, that they are inadequate.

The answer is still to be found in the schools with appropriate curriculum and collegial understandings among teachers and principal that make retention unnecessary. Once the larger context of curriculum escalation is understood, then perhaps groups of early-grade teachers and their principal will have greater incentive to resist the myriad pressures and reject the factory-model, accountability culture that is rendering more and more children "unteachable."
TEXTBOOK FIASCO
(Continued from page 27)
density of new, italicized (but poorly explained) tech-
nical terms on each page is a good measure of the extent of
nomenclature. Entire books, like the biology example
below, are often glossaries masquerading as textbooks.

NUCLEIC ACIDS: New vocabulary: chromosome, nucleic
acid, DNA, RNA, nucleotide.
In the nucleus of a cell are threadlike strands called chro-
mosomes (KROH-moh-somers). They are composed of pro-
teins and nucleic acid (nu-KLEE-ahk). The proteins in nucleic
acids make up two important chemicals, DNA and RNA.
Nucleic acids are organic compounds that are made
up of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and phos-
phorus.
DNA and RNA are not the only nucleic acids, but they do
have special roles in the cell. RNA is involved in making
proteins. DNA is involved in controlling the cells' activities.
Both are involved in passing characteristics from
parents to offspring.
Each nucleic acid is made up of units called nucleosides
(NUH-kee-uh-uh-sides). In turn, each nucleoside is composed
of three parts: a chemical group containing phosphorus, a
group containing nitrogen, and a simple sugar.

If you find this incomprehensible, pity the poor ninth
grader. In this range of passive voice sentences, cause
and effect relationships become lost. The author
switches back and forth between parts and chemical
compounds without warning. The signals—"are com-
pounded of" and "are made up of"—are inconsistently
applied. The lack of a direct response to such "mentioning"
and bad writing is "So what?" or "Who cares?"

The "mentioning" problem, like the bad writing problem,
is directly attributable to public policies and procedures.
Adoption states that generate excessively
detailed textbook specifications seldom take into
account the time it would take to teach all their
required items, or the space available in a standard-sized
textbook. Typical selection procedures seldom take into
account the critical mass of information a student
needs to understand an unfamiliar topic.

The problem of too many topics in too little space is
especially severe in social studies, history, and science
books. The Thirty Years' War will be "covered" in a
paragraph, the Nixon presidency in two sentences.
Nucleotides will be mentioned, and the glossary will
contain a circular definition, but the student will not
learn much about them. All of the small facts and terms
that can go in the multiple-choice test will appear in
the index, because that is where adoption commit-
tees usually check on Curricular and test "congruence"—if they check at all.

In recent decades, the "mentioning" problem has be-
come more acute. Special-interest groups pressure
policymakers to include material in the curriculum
and therefore the textbooks) about their favorite sub-
jects. Policymakers find it difficult to resist these pres-
dures because, for the most part, the additions sound
reasonable. A state or local schoolboard can submit,
without much expense or inconvenience, to demands from envi-
ronmentalists, the health food lobby, advocates of the
work ethic, and any organized minority group.

Even when good causes are not involved, there are
often pressures to teach more and more academic mate-
rial as the scope of knowledge within disciplines
expands. School systems, test developers, and textbook
publishers often ask university professors to serve on
advisory committees, and in that setting professors gen-
erally listen to one another, sometimes even copying
one another's suggestions to the list of what should be taught.

With so much to stuff into the book, editors make sacri-
ces. Since publishers are held accountable for a jumble of topics and facts, but not for coherence, coher-
ence suffers. A thoughtful reader finds it tough to
detect the pattern that has determined an author's
choices.

Lacking any firm basis for choosing material, and
required to include so much, textbook authors easily fall into the "mentioning" trap. A student may be told,
for example, that Aristotle "wrote...". The political orga-
nization of 150 city states and put down his conclusions in a
book called Politics." He won't be told, however, what
Aristotle actually said.

At the moment, school officials prefer mentioning to
coherence because they are obsessed with the idea that
the textbook must cover as many of the facts and topics
in the curriculum and tests as possible. With so little
time to examine books, adoption committees check up on
textbooks/curriculum/test congruence by checking the
labels, captions, index, and glossary. Knowing how super-
fluously books are examined, publishers are often
advised to sacrifice depth and comprehensibility and
concentrate on coverage, however inadequate it may be.

Publishers also sacrifice material that may cause them
to be criticized or to lose sales. Pressures from the
politically organized, religious right have made it risky
for publishers to discuss evolution. If evolution is dis-
gressed at all, it is often confined to a chapter at the end
of the book. Students are conducted on a forced march
each through the phyla, and given no understanding of
the overarching theory (evolution) that gives taxonomy its
meaning. But these are the differences, the goals, the
record, genetics, natural selection, or even the scientific
meanings of the words "theory" and "belief" are treated
simply or vaguely in order to satisfy fundamentalists.

Bad writing and the "mentioning" problem are inter-
ately related. It is hard to write well about a vast span of
history in one paragraph. A scientist might call a one-
page explanation of photosynthesis "accurate" while a
writer will call it "boring." Both are right; they have
tested the text from different perspec-
tives. Style and tone are intimately related, and so are
pace and accuracy, as every newspaper reporter knows.

Some teachers defend today's outline-style textbook
on the grounds that they can fill in whatever information
the textbook omits. Such a defense suggests that the
book is not even expected to be comprehensible on its
own. Many teachers today see the book as material
for students to read, but as a reference guide to the
material that is supposed to be covered in class. They
have, in effect, given up on the possibility that a text-
book can be an independent source of learning.

REFERENCES
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