FLUNKING KINDERGARTEN: ESCALATING CURRICULUM LEAVES MANY BEHIND

BY LORRIE A. SHEPARD AND MARY LEE SMITH

NEXT YEAR Michael Lee will repeat kindergarten because he flunked the Georgia readiness test for first grade. Judging from his fidgety behavior and inability to cope with scissors and other fine-motor tasks, his teacher confirmed that Michael Lee could benefit from another year before going on to first. Across the country the practice of kindergarten retention for many children like Michael Lee is increasing dramatically. In some districts, 10%, 25%, 33%, or as many as 60% of kindergartners are judged to be unready for the academic rigors of first grade. Unready children are provided alternative programming: developmental kindergarten (followed by regular kindergarten), transition or pre-first grade, or repeating kindergarten.

An extra year before first grade is intended to protect unready children from entering too soon into a demanding academic environment where, it is thought, they will almost surely experience failure. Depending on the philosophical basis of kindergarten retention, which differs profoundly from one district to the next, the extra year is meant either to be a time for immature children to grow and develop learning readiness or a time to work on deficient prereading skills.

The advocates of kindergarten retention are undoubtedly well intentioned. They see retention as a way for the school to respond to the enormous differences in background experiences, developmental stages, and aptitudes of the young children who present themselves at the schoolhouse door. They view it as a policy that has the child's best interests at heart and as a means, as they would put it, to prevent failure before it occurs. The question is: Are they right? Is kindergarten retention a helpful remedy for the problems it is intended to address?

For the past four years we have conducted research on the issues surrounding kindergarten retention: What are current practices? What problems are encountered by children who are youngest in their grade? How accurate are the tests used for screening? What are the effects of extra-year programs? What are the differences in school cultures that account for low incidence of retention in one school and high incidence in the next?

In this article we summarize three of our major findings: 1) Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement. 2) Regardless of what it is called, the extra year creates a social stigma. 3) And most ironically, the practice of kindergarten retention actually fosters the problem it was intended to solve—it feeds the escalation of inappropriate academic demand in first grade.

We have been able to locate 14 controlled studies that document the effects of kindergarten retention: 6 studies that were included in Gredler's 1984 major review of the research on transition rooms and 8 newly identified empirical studies.[1] The dominant finding is one of no difference. Gredler concluded that at-risk children, promoted to first grade, achieved as well or better than children who spent an extra year in transition rooms. The additional studies we located confirmed Gredler's conclusion. Children who spend an extra year in transition rooms are no better off at the end of first grade than comparable children who were recommended to repeat but whose parents refused.

In the study we conducted in Colorado, extra-year children were matched with control children on sex (mostly boys), birth month (mostly near the entrance-age cutoff), and measured readiness at the start of kindergarten. Measured at the end of first grade, there was again no difference on standardized math scores or on teacher ratings of reading and math achievement, learner self-concept, social maturity, and attention span. The only significant result was on standardized reading scores, where the retained children were only one month ahead of promoted children. These no-difference findings are surprising considering that by this time the retained children were a year older and had had an additional year of schooling compared to the control children who began equally at risk. That is, each group of children was tested at the end of first grade. But by the time the retained children were tested, they had had two years of kindergarten and one year of first grade, as compared to one year of kindergarten and one year of first grade for the promoted children.

When parents are asked to agree to retention or transition placement they are often told that, given the

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Lorrie Shepard is chair of Research and Evaluation Methodology in the School of Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research focuses on uses of tests in educational settings. Mary Lee Smith is professor in the College of Education, Arizona State University. She specializes in qualitative research methods and studies of diversions in pupils' careers.

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.

ILLUSTRATED BY BOBBI TULL

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.[2] During their year in transition class, the 27 children in the Norman program gained an average of *55 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 on to 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 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 gains 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 been had they stayed with their age peers. Young 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 matched 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 that 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-first 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 first grade with parents who had previously agreed to developmental or transition placements for their children. The majority of parents said that on balance the extra year had been the correct decision. Even if their children were doing poorly in first grade, they believed they were ahead of where they would have been without the extra year (and we did not tell them that the control group made equal progress). A majority 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 what 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 would have 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 because 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. Not so 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 wouldn't be. That was a real hard part of it. I think it helped her more than it hindered her.

> I personally think it's better 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 held back.

Kindergarten retention is similar in many respects to tracking and special education placements for mild learning problems. The logic of providing 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 expectations, and watered-down instruction. From findings in these other literatures it is possible to speculate about why 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.[3] 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 very gross and inaccurate way to individualize instruction because it requires a 12-month dislocation. Children who are judged to be unready by three months 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 suffers 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.[4] 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.[5] 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 30 to 50 percent or more of children said to be unready will be falsely identified.[6]

Over the long term, kindergarten retention has a final negative consequence. Children who are over age for their grade have a much greater 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.[7] 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.[8] These findings hold true in both rich and poor school districts.

THE CURRENT fad to flunk 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.[9]

In a forthcoming article for the *Elementary School Journal*, we document the societal factors behind the escalation: universal availability of kindergartens, pervasiveness of preschool, and Sesame Street. If everyone has had kindergarten, then first grade teachers assume as prerequisites those letter 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 preprimers 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 accomplishments. 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.[10] 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 proficiencies learned by rote 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.[11] More seriously, fixed, higher standards injure at-risk pupils, causing many more children to fail who would have, in due course, done quite well. The clearest victims of inappropriate curriculum are the children who are judged inadequate by its standards, children who can't stay in the lines and sit still long enough.

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 curricular expectations to the capabilities of an older, faster-moving group can be demonstrated in the research literature on school entrance ages.[12] 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 age 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 stratified 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

sort, label, track, and retain. Although these non-retention schools were also very academic and teachers had goals for skill development in kindergarten, a child who was not yet proficient would not be failed. Instead there were cooperative understandings between teachers. The kindergarten teacher would begin at the child's level and move him along to the extent possible, and the first grade teacher would pick up where the kindergarten teacher left off. These schools also had more flexible between-grade arrangements. Children moved more freely across grade boundaries, as exemplified by cross-age tutoring or a child visiting the next-higher grade three hours a week for reading instruction.

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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 yet 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, test 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 "unready." □

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density of new, italicized (but poorly explained) technical terms on each page is a good measure of the extent of mentioning. Entire books, like the biology example below, are often glossaries masquerading as textbooks.

> NUCLEIC ACIDS New vocabulary: chromosome, nucleic acid, DNA, RNA, nucleotide.
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> In the nucleus of a cell are threadlike strands called *chromosomes* (KRO-muh-somz). They are composed of proteins and *nucleic acids* (noo-KLAY'-ik). 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 phosphorus.
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> 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 cell's activities. ***Both are involved in passing on characteristics from parents to offspring.***
>
> Each nucleic acid is made up of units called *nucleotides* (NOO'-klee-uh-tidz). In turn, each nucleotide 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 tangle 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 composed of" and "are made up of"—are inconsistently applied. The intelligent 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 be tested on a multiple-choice test will appear in the index, because that is where adoption committees usually check on curricular and test "congruence"—if they check at all.

In recent decades, the "mentioning" problem has become more acute. Special-interest groups pressure policymakers to include more material in the curriculum (and therefore the textbooks) about their favorite subjects. Policymakers find it difficult to resist these pressures because, for the most part, the additions sound reasonable. A state or local schoolboard can submit, without a troubled conscience, to demands from environmentalists, the health food lobby, advocates of the work ethic, and any organized minority group.

Even where good causes are not involved, there are adult pressures to teach more and more academic material 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 generally defer to one another, cheerfully adding each other's suggestions to the list of what should be taught.

With so much to stuff into the book, editors make sacrifices. Since publishers are held to account for a jumble of topics and facts, but not for coherence, coherence 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 "studied the political organization of 150 city states and put down his conclusions in a book called *Politics.*" He won't be told, however, what Aristotle's conclusions were.

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 textbook/curriculum/test congruence by checking the labels, captions, index, and glossary. Knowing how superficially books are examined, publishers are best 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 discusssed at all, it is often confined to a chapter at the end of the book. Students are conducted on a forced march through the phyla, and given no understanding of the overarching theory (evolution) that gives taxonomy life and meaning. Touchy subjects, like dinosaurs, the fossil record, genetics, natural selection, or even the scientific meanings of the words "theory" and "belief" are treated skimpily or vaguely in order to avoid fundamentalist ire.

Bad writing and the "mentioning" problem are intimately 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 "inaccurate" while a writer will call it "badly written." They are both right, but they have examined the text from different perspectives. Sense and style are intimately related, and so are space and accuracy, as every newspaper reporter know.

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 no longer 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 textbook can be an independent source of learning. □

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