

Defining Kindergarten Education in an Era of Accountability

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“Kindergarten is no longer about doing kid stuff,” declared a recent article in the San Diego Tribune.[i] Echoing a growing number of accounts in newspapers and magazines, the article describes a dramatic shift in public expectations for what and how much children should learn in kindergarten. The notion of an academic kindergarten curriculum is a significant change from the original kindergarten model. Kindertartens originated in Germany as a distinctive educational approach based on the educative value of children’s natural and spontaneous play in their cognitive and social development. The founder of the kindergarten movement, Friedrich Froebel, rejected the rigid structure of traditional schools, designing kindertartens to be intentionally non-academic. When Elizabeth Peabody opened the first English speaking kindergarten in the U.S. in 1860, she followed Froebel’s model and thus, the original U.S. kindergarten model was also decidedly non-academic and child-centered.[ii]

When kindertartens were pulled into public elementary schools during the first half of the twentieth century, kindergarten teachers confronted pressure to teach like their upper grade colleagues. As a result, a “professional tug-of-war” developed between supporters of an academic kindergarten and advocates of a non-academic or developmental kindergarten program.[iii] Generally speaking, a developmental kindergarten program is one in which the purpose of early childhood education is to support children’s personal development with education following development. In contrast, an academic model is principally aimed at supporting children’s learning through the teaching of specific content and skills. The academic and developmental kindergarten models are rooted in contrasting assumptions about the goals of early childhood education, the way young children learn, and beliefs about what is appropriate kindergarten instruction.

Contemporary early childhood education scholars argue that the distinction between developmental and academic programs is a false dichotomy such that early childhood programs should teach academic content employing developmentally appropriate teaching strategies and attending to students’ social, emotional and cognitive development.[iv] However, when researchers have observed and interviewed kindergarten teachers their findings tend to reinforce this distinction between academic and developmental kindertartens: teachers tend to teach in ways that were largely consistent with either an academic or developmental model.[v]

In recent years, there have been increasingly prevalent accounts that kindergarten is becoming more academic. Newspaper and magazine articles in the current decade describe a kindergarten that is decidedly academic. This raises the question have expectations and practices in kindergarten tipped in the direction of an academic model? For the last four years I have been pursuing a line of research examining the effects of educational policy on kindergarten teachers’ work. In this article, I explore the issue of rising academic expectations in kindergarten drawing on what I learned from a series of research studies.[vi] My research suggests there is evidence that kindertartens are increasingly emphasizing academic skills, and particularly academic skills taught through teacher-centered instruction. As kindertartens drift from their

original developmental model, the activities of professional association like the California Kindergarten Association (CKA) become increasingly important in defining the future of kindergarten education. Therefore, the article concludes with recommendations for the role the CKA can play in light of my findings.

Kindergarten Education and Accountability

I first became interested in this tension while participating in a study of educators' responses to California's early accountability policy (the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999). Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) designed a study aiming to foster communication between educators and policymakers by highlighting the experiences of teachers and administrators.[vii] The research team interviewed kindergarten, second and fourth grade teachers in eight elementary schools (two schools in each of four districts) across the state. In order to capture the diversity of California's public schools, the schools/districts represented a range of student populations, community characteristics and student achievement levels. Interviews with kindergarten teachers were included in the design of the study to represent a contrast case, such that kindergarten students were not subject to the state's main accountability mechanism: state testing. As a result, we sought to examine whether accountability policies were having indirect effects, influencing teachers in an untested grade.

A surprising finding emerged from the interviews: most kindergarten teachers commented on the changing nature of kindergarten and the role accountability pressures played in this shift. They felt the curriculum was becoming much more academic as a result of the standards, focusing less on students' social, emotional and physical development. In fact, a sizable proportion of kindergarten teachers reported they now feel like they are teaching first grade. As one teacher explained, "The standards from first grade have been pushed onto kindergarten, and we're supposed to teach them to read in kindergarten now." Overall, the majority of kindergarten teachers described the kindergarten curriculum as focused primarily on mastering academic skills. In addition to the effects of state standards, teachers noted that district policies such as benchmark or progress testing were reinforcing an emphasis on academic instruction. Many teachers reported spending considerable amounts of time with students preparing for and administering assessments.

In addition, some teachers (particular veterans) expressed strong concerns about the direction in which kindergarten was heading. A sizeable number of teachers felt the change was not appropriate for young children. For example, one teacher said, "The kids are developmentally in the same place where they were, but the expectation is for them to be doing academic work that is first grade work; and for some of these kids, you are stepping all over their developmental foundations to teach something that they are not ready for." Similarly, another teacher expressed her concern saying, "I think that my goals that I have for children now are quite different than what my heart tells me they should be doing and my years of practice coming with it. So that I am doing much more paperwork and academic work and less of the types of things that I think really, really work for little kids." A beginning kindergarten teacher expressed her frustration with the academic pressure she and her students feel saying, "It takes the joy out of teaching."

This finding may come as no surprise to educators whose careers have spanned multiple decades and/or remember their own kindergarten experiences as a dramatic

departure from what they now teach in kindergarten classrooms. But from a policy perspective, it was a surprise to hear accountability policies dramatically influencing teachers who were not directly held accountable for student achievement. As a result, I continued pursuing a line of research investigating teachers' expressed concerns over an academic kindergarten model. Specifically, I examined a range of indicators of change in kindergarten including media messages about kindergarten, teachers' perceptions of their practice and direct observation of kindergarten classrooms.

Shifts in Public Expectations for Kindergarten

One indicator of how kindergartens have changed over time emerges from examining media representations. Media representations provide a window into popular sentiments expressed at a particular moment in time. Newspaper articles about kindergartens in the Los Angeles Times and New York Times from 1950 to the present, reveal a significant change in media accounts of the purpose of kindergarten education. Nearly all articles in the 1950s and the majority of articles in the 1960s and 1970s described kindergartens in developmental terms. Articles consistent with a developmental model during this time portrayed kindergarten students participating in activities such as play, art projects, gardening, and social interaction. For example, an article appearing in the Los Angeles Times in 1953 included a picture of two kindergarten students with the following caption: "Patsy Powell and Cathy Culley are having fun with modeling clay. Song, dance, rest, and milk also are part of the kindergarten program."^[viii] Similarly, another article in the Los Angeles Times included this statement about the goals of kindergarten: "Kindergarten is where the child begins to develop his sense of responsibility and good work habits and learns to make desirable adjustments to life's situations."^[ix] Both of these articles represent a broader trend: articles in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s typically portrayed a developmental kindergarten model.

Yet over time, newspaper articles began to report about attempts to infuse academic instruction into kindergarten programs. For example, articles reported on school districts that were experimenting with early reading instruction in the 1960s and 1970s. And in the 1990s and the current decade, most articles describe kindergarten programs aimed at teaching academic skills. In sharp contrast to articles in past decades, articles of this decade refer to kindergarten as "a thicket of academic challenges."^[x] For example, an article appearing in the New York Times in 2006 begins, "The word 'kindergarten' means 'children's garden,' and for years has conjured up an image of children playing with blocks, splashing at water tables, dressing up in costumes or playing house. Now, with an increased emphasis on academic achievement even in the earliest grades, playtime in kindergarten is giving way to worksheets, math drills and fill-in-the-bubble standardized tests."^[xi]

The way kindergartens are portrayed in the popular media can be considered a rough indicator of a shift in public expectations regarding the purpose of kindergarten education. As more articles portray kindergartens as a year focused on formal academic learning, the public may come to expect an academic kindergarten model. As such, increased media attention to academic instruction in kindergarten may act to solidify public attitudes about kindergarten so that we come to think of kindergarten as synonymous with formal academic instruction.

How Academic Pressure Plays Out in Local Schools and Districts

While public expectations for kindergarten may have shifted, examining newspaper content provides little insight into actual kindergarten education: what teachers and students do in classrooms. Therefore, I observed and interviewed a small sample of kindergarten teachers to examine trends in kindergarten curriculum and the instructional strategies employed by kindergarten teachers.

Kindergarten Curriculum Emphasizes Academic Skills

In California, the official kindergarten curriculum, as defined by the state content standards, clearly promotes an academic kindergarten program. State content standards describe what all students should know and be able to do by the time they leave kindergarten. The notion of fixed expectations for all students runs counter to a developmental kindergarten model such that it advances an expectation that all students will master the same content and skills at the same time. In addition, standards emphasize segmented skills parsed into the traditional academic subject areas. In total, the kindergarten standards specify 195 specific skills that students are expected to master by the end of their first formal year in school.

The implementation of the standards emphasized traditional academic subjects as evidenced by the delay in releasing the arts and physical education standards. In 1997, the California Board of Education adopted English/Language Arts and Mathematics content standards for California public schools grades kindergarten through twelve. It subsequently adopted standards in history-social sciences and science in 1998, followed by visual and performing arts standards in 2001 and finally physical education standards in 2006.

The standards have had a profound impact on the kindergarten curriculum. Many kindergarten teachers interviewed for the ERAP study in 2002-2003 and all teachers interviewed for my more recent study in 2005-2006 reported that the standards influence what they teach. Prior to adoption of the standards in 1999, kindergarten teachers (or at least local schools and districts) had considerable discretion over the type of kindergarten program they implemented. Now the state defines the kindergarten curriculum and teachers are expected to use the standards to guide their instructional choices. In particular, many teachers pointed to the expectation that all kindergarten students will master basic reading skills, as a significant departure from past expectations. As one teacher interviewed for the ERAP study explained: "They [kindergartens] used to be graham crackers and milk, singing, and a lot of socialization. Now the emphasis is not socialization skills. The emphasis is on academics. These little kids are expected to read and write in English by the end of the year." In addition, many schools and districts ensure that teachers follow state standards through policies such as mandated curriculum programs (particularly in language arts), curriculum pacing guides, standards-based report cards and interim assessments.

Accountability Pressures Promote Didactic Instruction

While standards define the content that must be taught in California's kindergarten classrooms, the state gives teachers discretion to choose the way they want to teach academic skills. In theory, teachers could teach academic content in ways

that are considered by the profession to be developmentally appropriate. For example, the state and professional organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have issued guidelines about teaching academic skills and content using Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP).[xii] And in fact, in most kindergarten classrooms I observed teachers spent some portion of their time orchestrating child-centered academic activities in which students engaged with academic content through hands-on activities and concrete experiences.

However, my research suggests that in some schools teachers confront considerable external pressure to enact a narrow form of academic instruction: an emphasis on basic academic skills through teacher-centered instructional strategies and a heavy reliance on paper-and-pencil tasks such as workbooks and worksheets for individual practice.

Teachers reported that aspects of their teaching context influenced their pedagogical choices. In other words, teachers felt varying degrees of pressure to enact a narrow academic kindergarten program depending on their teaching context. Teachers identified aspects of their teaching context that influenced their instructional practice including principals, district curriculum, parents, state and federal accountability policies, and their grade level peers. But teachers experienced pressure differently depending on their school context. Two schools that I visited present the most salient contrasts: Pine Elementary and Maple Elementary.[xiii]

When compared to other schools, teachers at Pine Elementary engaged in the most teacher-directed academic instruction. Pine was also the school under the most pressure from state and federal accountability policies. A very low performing Reading First school, Pine had previously been reconstituted, and teachers faced the looming threat of losing their jobs if school performance did not increase. As a result, teachers – even those in kindergarten, an untested grade – reported intense scrutiny and pressure to comply with their district’s instructional reform program including rigid adherence to a commercial reading curriculum, curriculum pacing guides, and district performance assessments. Most aspects of the reform program encouraged teachers to use didactic teaching methods and to focus nearly exclusively on developing students’ academic skills in reading and mathematics. In this school I observed students spending much of their time seated at desks filling out worksheets or workbooks.

In sharp contrast, kindergarten teachers at Maple elementary engaged in the highest proportion of child-centered academic teaching. Maple is a high performing school in the same district as Pine, but teachers at Maple reported considerably less pressure to comply with the district’s reform program and no connection to state and federal accountability pressures. While teachers reported relative autonomy from the district when making decisions about curriculum and instruction, they were influenced by their students’ parents. Parents were a constant presence in kindergarten classrooms and voiced their goals for students to teachers; in particular, a desire that students be exposed to rigorous academic content. However, unlike at Pine, the active presence of parents in kindergarten classrooms at Maple enabled teachers to plan and implement student-centered activities; parents helped teachers prepare materials and assisted as teachers orchestrated project-based learning. In fact, each day I observed at Maple, parents were running activity centers that engaged students in hands-on projects. The cases of Maple and Pine reveal how a school’s broader context can play a role in shaping instruction in classrooms.

In conclusion, while kindergartens have historically “struggled to find a place and a purpose in US education,” a new era of policy and societal pressures have accelerated the shift to academic instruction in recent decades.[xiv] A range of indicators suggest many kindergarten programs now focus on the teaching of academic content. More significantly, I argue that a range of pressures from reform policies promote a narrow conception of academic teaching: specifically an over-emphasis on teacher-directed instruction emphasizing basic skills and pencil and paper tasks.

Implications of Escalating Academic Demands in Kindergarten

If kindergartens are becoming more academic – as suggested by my research and that of other researchers – and more academic in a particular way (teacher directed and pencil and paper tasks), what are the implications for student learning? While this question is beyond the scope of my research to date, some insight can be gleaned from other studies.

Research has identified particular instructional practices associated with academic achievement. First, research has consistently shown positive effects of early reading instruction on both students’ short term and long term reading achievement.[xv] This suggests that the emphasis on reading instruction observed in my research may contribute to student learning.

However, there is less agreement about how kindergarten teachers should teach reading. While some studies report benefits of a phonics-based approach, others point to a balanced literacy approach employing various instructional strategies.[xvi] My observations and conversations with teachers reveal considerable pressure in California to emphasize direct instruction in phonics because of how some districts are interpreting and implementing state mandated reading programs. But most teachers also incorporated aspects of a balanced approach by also cultivating a print rich environment and reading to students daily.

What remains particularly controversial is the relationship between the use of “developmentally appropriate practices” (DAP) and student achievement. Overall, studies examining the effects of DAP have failed to show a consistent positive effect on student learning.[xvii] However, these studies focused on DAP’s effects on students’ academic skills. Other studies that examine the effect of DAP on student motivation have consistently found positive results.[xviii] As such, more research is needed to examine the use of DAP to teach academic skills and the effects of these practices on both students’ academic achievement and their motivation and desire to learn.

The Role of the CKA in Shaping the Future of Kindergarten in California

In conclusion, public sentiment and research have converged on the desirability of teaching academic skills in kindergarten. While the research community has not reached consensus on optimal instruction in kindergarten, it seems reasonable to suggest that kindergarten teachers should strive to maintain a balanced approach (attending to students’ academic, social and emotional development) and teach in ways that both educate and motivate students. However, policy pressures in some schools and districts result in teachers experiencing pressure to emphasize a narrow conception

of academic instruction. As such, I will conclude with some recommendations regarding the role the CKA can play in shaping the future of kindergarten instruction.

Research and theory point to the role professions can play in shaping the identity and work practices of their members. Teaching has traditionally been subject to weak professional controls such that many teachers' associations are not organized around issues tightly related to professional practice. For example, teachers' unions have historically focused on bread and butter issues such as salaries, benefits, and working conditions.[xix] In addition, some scholars argue that kindergarten teachers lack a clear professional identity as early childhood educators and are thus ill-equipped to create appropriate programs or to counter inappropriate demands made by parents, administrators, or legislators.[xx] Professional associations such as the CKA can play a role in building consensus on appropriate practices for the education of young children by maintaining an active dialogue between policymakers, researchers and practitioners, as well as staying focused on issues of teaching and learning.

In addition, the CKA is uniquely positioned to support kindergarten teachers' professional learning because of its targeted focus on early childhood education. In my interviews, kindergarten teachers consistently expressed frustration that professional development opportunities in their school districts did not meet their needs because they did not directly address the education of young children. As such, the CKA stands to play an important role in providing opportunities for teacher development that emphasize a balanced approach to teaching academic content with pedagogical practices that meet the diverse developmental needs of young children. CKA can further this mission by continuing to actively reach out to new members and encouraging local districts to provide ongoing professional learning opportunities targeted specifically at teachers of young children.

Furthermore, the CKA may want to play a role in trying to shape the policy context that dictates a key dimension of kindergarten teachers' work: the length of the school day. Some research suggests that full day kindergarten programs may be associated with more child-centered instructional approaches and that children who attend schools that offer full-day programs learn more in literacy and mathematics than their half-day counterparts.[xxi] Although there is no consensus on the benefits of full day kindergarten – in part because some studies indicate that the initial benefits for students who attend full-day kindergarten largely evaporate over time – if we want teachers to engage in a balanced approach including hands-on projects and rich experiences in service of learning rigorous academic content, teachers need sufficient instructional time with students.[xxii] This is especially true given that teachers must teach a broad range of academic standards. My research suggests that when faced with an overwhelming set of standards, many teachers default to didactic teaching methods which seem more efficient or easier given limited preparation time. In a state where kindergarten is not mandatory, it remains vulnerable in times of budget shortfalls. In fact, one of the districts I studied had recently cut kindergarten from full day to a staggered half day due to budgetary constraints. As such, the CKA may consider engaging in efforts to lobby for state legislation that secures access to full day kindergarten for all students.

Finally, given the lack of consensus on many key issues related to early childhood education, the CKA may take a leadership role in advancing the research

base on young children's learning and the teaching that supports learning for all students. As the previous section noted, there is a great need for research that examines the efficacy of popular practical knowledge such as the NAEYC's guidelines on developmentally appropriate practices. CKA could collaborate with researchers to develop effective instructional practices and advance our understanding of how young children learn. In addition, CKA could play a vital role in keeping its members abreast of research-based practices through its publications, as well as affording teachers opportunities to evaluate research advances in forums such as the annual conference.

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- [vi] This article is not meant to provide a formal report of my research findings. In order to examine more complete findings see the following: Russell, J. (2006). An enduring tension: Kindergarten education in an era of accountability. In C. Miskel & W. Hoy (eds.). 2006. *Contemporary Issues in Educational Policy and School Outcomes (Research and Theory in Educational Administration)* Greenwich, CT: Information Age; Russell, J. (2007). *Not Kid Stuff Anymore: Institutional Change in Kindergarten Education*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley.

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