

## Was Kindergarten Left Behind? Examining US Kindergarten as the New First Grade in the Wake of *No Child Left Behind*

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### Abstract

Since the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001, public schools in the United States have witnessed an influx of reforms intended to elevate students' academic standing in a global economy. The unprecedented federal involvement in education resulting from the passage of NCLB has propelled a nationwide movement to standardize instruction, raise achievement levels, and hold schools accountable for improved student outcomes. The kindergarten classroom has not been immune to these efforts. This critical review of literature published within the years 2001-2016 synthesizes empirical and theoretical research centered on US kindergarten post-NCLB. Connecting NCLB's increased emphasis on standards and accountability to issues of kindergarten readiness, the role of academics, play, and developmental appropriateness in kindergarten, and changes in kindergarten literacy instruction, the author examines the complicated nature of teaching and learning in kindergarten in the wake of NCLB, with implications for research, policy, and practice.

### Keywords

Kindergarten, No Child Left Behind, United States, federal education policy, early literacy, readiness, developmentally appropriate practice

*Many methods and theories have come and gone, yet none has been "proven" to be the best for kindergartners. The often unasked question is, "Best for what?" For socializing young children? For teaching the 3 Rs? For getting ready for first grade? For eradicating poverty and illiteracy? For stimulating creativity and independence? ...over the years kindergarten has been called upon to do all of these tasks. It still is.*

—Bryant & Clifford, 1992, p. 151

### Introduction

In the United States, kindergarten has been an education reform with remarkable staying power (Cuban, 1992). Inspired by German educator Friedrich Froebel and his "children's garden," the first publically-funded US kindergarten

opened in St. Louis, Missouri in 1873 (Dombkowski, 2001). By the 1950s, local, state,

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and federal support for kindergarten—strengthened by its growing public popularity—helped to firmly secure the reform as part of the US public school system (Cuban, 1992), with 70% of the nation’s school districts offering kindergarten by 1959 (Dombkowski, 2001). By 1986, every state in the nation subsidized kindergarten, at least in part (Dhuey, 2011), though at the time of writing only thirteen states and the District of Columbia require their public schools to provide full-day kindergarten programs (Parker, Diffey, & Atchison, 2016).

In spite of the traction that kindergarten gained and has maintained, it continues to hold a unique and often contested role in United States public schools (Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Dombkowski, 2001). While kindergarten entry marks a significant milestone for most five- and six-year-olds across the country, kindergarten is only compulsory in fifteen US states (Workman, 2014). Moreover, though many young children have prior outside-of-the-home learning experiences at preschools and/or childcare centers, kindergarten has traditionally served to bridge these early experiences with the more formal, academically-focused learning environments ubiquitous in first grade classrooms and beyond. Yet recent changes in the nature and role of kindergarten have caused some to wonder whether kindergarten is “the new first grade” (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Strauss, 2016).

This critical literature review synthesizes empirical and theoretical research centered on kindergarten in the United States, focusing primarily on peer-reviewed articles published after the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) during the years 2001-2016. Because NCLB signaled an unprecedented level of federal involvement in K-12 education—resulting in an increased emphasis on standards-based instruction and high-stakes accountability (McGuinn, 2006; Meens & Howe, 2015)—I wanted to know what links might be made

between the onset of NCLB and perceived/actual changes in the nature and role of kindergarten. As a literacy teacher educator and scholar, I was especially interested in finding out if and how the increased federal emphasis on standards and accountability has impacted literacy instruction in US kindergarten classrooms. Because the provisions of NCLB specifically focused on improving academic outcomes for children from high-poverty and minoritized marginalized backgrounds, my review focuses on how these children, in particular, have fared in the wake of this policy.

Approaching my review from a critical sociocultural perspective (Heath, 1982; Perry, 2012; Street, 1995), I acknowledge that the experiences of students and teachers are shaped by the beliefs and attitudes they hold, which are shaped by the communities and institutions within which they live and operate, as well as their cultural and linguistic practices, personal histories, and ongoing interactions with others (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Han, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). The questions I ask of the literature reflect my perspective that a policy like NCLB has as much influence on teachers and students as teachers and students have on the policy (Coburn, 2006; Goldstein, 2008; Lipsky, 1980; Spillane, 2004). Understanding this bi-directionality of influence is critical to informing not only how research on a policy is conducted, but what might be done in light of the implications of this research. Although kindergarten’s long history as a contested space has been well-documented by others (e.g., Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Cuban, 1992; Dombkowski, 2001; Russell, 2011), the complicated nature of teaching and learning in kindergarten post-NCLB demands greater attention by early childhood researchers. In the sections that follow, I offer my part.

This review begins with a brief background of the adoption of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, in order to provide context

for readers less familiar with US federal education policy. Next, I offer a description of the focus of my review. Source selection was guided by two primary questions, one focused on NCLB's impact on kindergarten more generally, and one focused specifically on literacy instruction. Reading the literature under the guidance of these questions, I was able to connect NCLB's increased emphasis on standards and accountability to: 1) *issues of kindergarten readiness*; 2) *the role of academics, play, and developmental appropriateness in kindergarten*; and 3) *changes in kindergarten literacy instruction*. While finality is a rare find in reviews of education research, I am able to provide readers with a better understanding of where US kindergarten stands in the wake of *No Child Left Behind*, with implications for research, policy, and practice.

### **No Child Left Behind**

Though *No Child Left Behind* officially became federal law in January 2002, the groundwork for the policy was laid nearly two decades prior. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*, documenting "a rising tide of mediocrity" in US public schools. *A Nation's* writers went on to lament, "What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments" (para 1). Ironically, while then-president Ronald Reagan had hoped to abolish the Federal Department of Education during his tenure as commander-in-chief, *A Nation at Risk* only further strengthened the role of the federal government in education (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). Eighteen years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, US Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also called the *No Child Left Behind Act*, marking the single greatest expansion of the federal role in education policy since the original

1965 legislation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Manna, 2010; McGuinn, 2006; Meens & Howe, 2015).

Since 1981, when the Reagan administration assumed control of the White House, a central theme in US federal education policy has been to improve K-12 academic outcomes in order to ensure that the United States remains intellectually, technologically, and economically dominant across the globe (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Cuban, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Although the eighth reauthorization of ESEA, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), officially supplanted *No Child Left Behind* in December 2015, NCLB launched a nationwide movement to standardize instruction, raise achievement levels, and hold schools accountable for student outcomes, the effects of which were far-reaching. In 2009, President Obama's *Race to the Top* initiative incentivized states to adopt the *Common Core Standards*, described by Bomer and Maloch (2011) as "the most sweeping nationalization of the K-12 curriculum in US history" (p. 38). To date, forty-two US states (84%), as well as the District of Columbia, four US territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have adopted the Common Core.

In sum, NCLB and the state and local policies it has inspired, have been linked to a rise in neoliberal political discourse across the globe, where privatization, free markets, and competition are viewed as the commonsense approach to curing social inequities and ensuring global dominance (Hursh, 2007; Kerkham & Nixon, 2014; Lingard, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Since 2001, US schools have witnessed an influx of reforms intended to elevate students' academic standing in a global economy, the kindergarten classroom has not been immune to these efforts. Today US kindergartners spend far less time engaged in play-based activities that were once at the heart of the kindergarten experience, and far more time receiving formal

math and literacy instruction (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Bowdon & Desimone, 2014). While early childhood scholars have critiqued this “academic shovedown” (Hatch, 2002), the global education reform movement continues to inform early childhood policy and practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2004; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Cannella, Salazar Pérez, & Lee, 2016). Concerns about the quality of early childhood education is largely understood in terms of ensuring children’s future economic productivity, rather than supporting their current social, emotional, and developmental well-being.

Although the shoving down of academics into kindergarten and preschool classrooms has largely been attributed to the standards and accountability movement (Brown, 2007; Stipek, 2006), since the 1920s, US kindergarten as an institution has struggled “... to define itself both as part of and as separate from the primary grades and as related to but separate from other forms of early childhood education” (Dombkowski, 2001, p. 528), particularly in terms of whether academics or play-based learning should be emphasized (Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Russell, 2011). Even a cursory reading of the history of kindergarten in the United States would suggest that the kindergarten classroom as a site of curricular and pedagogical controversy is nothing new (Bryant & Clifford, 1992; Dombkowski, 2001), and the years since the passage of NCLB have certainly been no exception (Russell, 2011). Nonetheless, a synthesis of the literature that explores the links between increased federal involvement in US public schools and specific changes in the experiences of kindergarten teachers and students is needed in order to reveal whose interests the policy has (and has not) served. This work is of particular importance for those of us committed to providing more equitable educational experiences for our youngest students.

## Focus of the Review

In spite of the bipartisan congressional support that led to the adoption of NCLB (McGuinn, 2006), the impact and associated consequences of the policy have been nothing short of controversial (Pennington, 2007). While a host of scholars have documented the ways in which literacy instruction in elementary school classrooms has changed since the adoption of NCLB (e.g., Bomer, 2006; Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Dutro, Selland, & Bien, 2013; Valli & Chambliss, 2007), the majority of the research has not explicitly focused on kindergarten. This serves in contrast to the increased media attention that kindergarten classrooms have received in recent years (e.g., McLaughlin, Carlsson-Paige, & Levin, 2014; Moyer, 2013; Paul, 2010; Pondiscio, 2015; Strauss, 2016). These two observations sparked my interest in conducting a more systematic review, attending to the literature on US kindergarten more generally and kindergarten literacy instruction in particular after the onset of NCLB. Thirty-seven peer-reviewed journal articles comprised the body of my review, which was guided by the following questions:

1. *What links can be made between the increased federal emphasis on standards and accountability ignited by No Child Left Behind and changes in the nature and role of US kindergarten?*
2. *How has kindergarten literacy instruction in particular been impacted post-NCLB?*

In the sections that follow, I demonstrate the ways in which NCLB’s emphasis on improving academic outcomes at all costs has indeed come at a cost, especially for students from low-income and/or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds—two groups of students that NCLB’s provisions purportedly aimed to help. Findings are organized according

to three prominent themes: 1) shifting conceptions of kindergarten readiness; 2) the tenuous relationship between play-based learning, direct academic instruction, and developmentally appropriate practice; and 3) the narrowing of the literacy curriculum, with greater emphasis placed on code-based skills acquisition (i.e., decontextualized literacy instruction).

### **Kindergarten Readiness and “Redshirting”**

Understanding conceptualizations of school readiness, and how they may have shifted post-NCLB, is important for those of us interested in providing more equitable and supportive schooling opportunities for young children. Brown and Lan’s (2015) meta-synthesis of teachers’ conceptions of kindergarten readiness prior to and post-NCLB documents changes in the conceptual frames that teachers historically and currently have used to understand whether or not a child is socially, developmentally, and/or cognitively *ready* for kindergarten. Prior to NCLB, kindergarten teachers overwhelmingly interpreted their students’ readiness through a “nativist lens” (Brown and Lan, 2015, p. 6), whereby *readiness* was attributed to something within the child (e.g., Meisels, 1999; Kagan, 1990), and did not depend upon the instruction they received prior to kindergarten. Before *No Child Left Behind*, those children who were identified as *not yet ready for kindergarten* typically fell into at least one of the following categories: physically smaller than their peers, born in the summer months, exhibiting social immaturity, and/or male (Brown & Lan, 2015).

Post-NCLB, kindergarten teachers (and policymakers) have placed more responsibility on their preschool colleagues to prepare children for kindergarten (i.e., toward an “empiricist understanding,” Brown & Lan, 2015, p. 6), interpreting *readiness* as a quality that preschool instruction should promote. Brown

and Lan (2015) attribute this change in how *readiness* is understood to the high-stakes standards-based accountability reforms ignited by NCLB. However, both the nativist and empiricist understandings of kindergarten readiness discount the interaction between the school context and the child (Meisels, 1999), a third conceptualization of readiness held by many preschool educators and early childhood education professional organizations (Brown & Lan, 2015, citing Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000 and Shaul & Schwartz, 2014). NCLB and the early childhood initiatives it inspired (e.g., The White House’s [2002] *Good Start, Grow Smart* campaign) place more onus on parents, preschool providers, and the children themselves to make sure that readiness happens, discounting the variables that inform who has access to the kinds of preschools that *best* prepare children for kindergarten. As such, post-NCLB there seems to be increased ambiguity among preschool providers, parents, and kindergarten teachers in terms of how readiness is understood, as well as whose job it is to ensure it is cultivated.

As high-stakes accountability reforms ignited by NCLB have increased expectations for what children should know and be able to do before and by the end of kindergarten (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012), some parents are choosing to give their child an extra year of preschool instead of sending them to kindergarten when they meet the age requirement (Moyer, 2013; Paul, 2010). *Academic redshirting*, the practice of refraining from sending a child to kindergarten in the year they first meet the district or state age requirement (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008), has been linked to parents’ efforts to give their children a particular advantage or competitive edge, academic or otherwise (e.g., what Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2002 called, “the gift of time”). Of course parents’ abilities to make this decision depend

greatly upon whether or not they can afford to pay for an additional year of preschool or childcare, meaning that redshirting is far more prevalent in middle- and upper-class households than in low-income households (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Dobkin & Ferreira, 2010).

Acknowledging this disparity, just how common is academic redshirting, and has the practice increased substantially since NCLB? Perhaps not as much as the media and previous research has reported. Based on data from the 2001 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth (ECLS-B) cohort, Bassok and Reardon (2013) estimated that approximately 4-5.5% of children eligible to attend kindergarten waited a year before enrolling. This finding is significant because the 2013 study relied on more recent data than in previous research (e.g., Frey, 2005; Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2002; Lincove & Painter, 2006) *and* because the children within the ECLS-B cohort were all born *after* the adoption of NCLB.

Surprisingly, Bassok and Reardon (2013) found no evidence to support the notion that developmental and cognitive differences among children impacted parental decisions to delay the start of kindergarten. Apart from children with low birthweights, for whom a number of other health and developmental challenges often co-occur (thereby influencing parents' decisions to delay entry), no significant developmental predictors differentiated children who began kindergarten on time and those who waited a year (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). However, the authors *did* observe significant differences in the prevalence of redshirting related to race, socioeconomic status (SES), and gender, with white males from higher SES backgrounds most likely to delay the start of kindergarten. Although this finding corroborates earlier studies (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Stipek, 2002), it contrasts with Lincove and Painter (2006), who found that white boys from *lower*

income homes were more likely to be redshirted. It is important to note, however, that Lincove and Painter (2006) based their conclusions on a much older data set (e.g., the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988).

Even though national estimates of the prevalence of academic redshirting are low, these rates likely vary substantially at the state and local levels (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). Moreover, although state funding of kindergarten has been linked to positive outcomes for nearly all subsets of students (Dhuey, 2011), some researchers have found that redshirting offers little to no long-term benefits (academic or otherwise), and may in fact be more harmful than helpful (Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Stipek, 2002). In other words, while increasing access to high-quality kindergarten has generally helped all students in the short and long run, the practice of delaying the onset of kindergarten has shown no definite benefits. This suggests that more localized studies of academic redshirting are needed, particularly to investigate how redshirting may influence perceptions of kindergarten readiness, as well as whether and/or how it may contribute to growing inequities between children from higher- and lower-income backgrounds.

### **All Work and No Play?**

A review of the research in the area of kindergarten readiness suggests that since NCLB, teachers' and parents' conceptualizations of readiness have shifted (Brown & Lan, 2015; Deming & Dynarski, 2008; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012). Whereas kindergarten teachers of the past were tasked with bridging play-based early learning opportunities to the more formal academic experiences students would encounter in first grade, most kindergarten teachers now expect students to engage with direct academic instruction at the very beginning of their kindergarten year (e.g., Russell, 2011). But has

an increased federal emphasis on standards and accountability impacted expectations for *what* children should be learning while they are in kindergarten, as well as *how* they should learn it? While other researchers have speculated that this might be the case (e.g., Deming & Dynarski, 2008), recent research by Bassok and colleagues has provided more clarity (see also Bowdon & Desimone, 2014). Early in 2016, Bassok, Latham, and Rorem published a longitudinal analysis of how US kindergarten has changed over a ten-year span. Drawing on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) data set, a nationally representative sample of a cohort of kindergarten students, teachers, and parents followed across time, Bassok et al. explored the hypothesis that kindergarten is the new first grade. This study was the first of its kind, utilizing ECLS-K cohort data from 1998-1999 and 2010-2011. Between the two cohorts of students and teachers, the researchers noted an increased emphasis on direct instruction and skill acquisition, and the reduction in play-based, exploratory learning models (Bassok et al., 2016). Indeed, the authors found reason to believe that kindergarten today has many of the same qualities as first grades of the past. Bassok et al.'s findings support those of earlier researchers who have observed that the academic expectations for US kindergarteners, particularly in literacy, have increased in recent years (e.g., Miller & Almon, 2009; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Whereas kindergarten was once the place where US children were taught the alphabet and letter-sound correspondence, now, at the very least, kindergarten teachers are expected to send their students to the first grade reading simple texts.

While Bassok et al.'s (2016) study provides convincing evidence that kindergarten content and pedagogy has indeed been influenced by NCLB's increased emphasis on standardization and high-stakes accountability, debates regarding the role of formal academic

instruction in kindergarten arose long before *No Child Left Behind* was signed into law. Since the 1980's, early childhood educators have increasingly advocated for the use of developmentally appropriate practice within early childhood curriculum (i.e., curriculum for children ages eight and younger) and pedagogy (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2006). Developmentally Appropriate Practice, or DAP, has been defined as "teaching decisions that vary with and adapt to the age, experience, interests, and abilities of individual children within a given age range" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006, p. 7). Proponents of DAP stress that deciding whether an instructional move is developmentally appropriate depends upon knowing the *student*, not a standard (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Miller & Almon, 2009). Many early childhood educators and researchers have argued that the majority of early education academic standards written in recent years have not been created with the developmental needs of young children in mind (Bomer & Maloch, 2011; Goldstein, 2008; Hatch, 2002; McLaughlin et al., 2014). Hatch (2002) referred to the adoption and implementation of early childhood academic standards as *academic shovedown*, noting that, "Standards-based approaches represent backward movement, designed to force early childhood programs into molds that don't work with older students and are downright harmful for young children" (p. 462).

Are higher academic expectations and developmentally appropriate practice fundamentally at odds with each other? While some would argue this is a false dichotomy (e.g., Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Riley & Jones, 2010; Snow, 2013), others would claim that meeting the demands of the standards, and simultaneously offering instruction at a level that meets the needs of the whole child is incredibly challenging (e.g., Bomer & Maloch, 2011; Goldstein, 2008). For example, Goldstein

(2008) directly connected the changing role of kindergarten to “NCLB’s transformation of the US educational climate” (p. 449), with kindergarten now representing the starting point of “a progressing, expanding, non-repeating curriculum of increasing complexity, depth, and breadth” (citing Ardivino, Hollingsworth, & Ybarra, 2000, p. 91). Additionally, Bomer and Maloch (2011) have stated that NCLB’s “apparatus of accountability” (i.e., high-stakes assessment beginning as early as preschool) has pushed early childhood educators to instruct in ways that have nothing to do with “the present practices in which the child engages” (p. 40).

It is important to point out that opposing standards-based instruction in the early grades does not necessarily reflect early childhood educators’ resistance to having *standards*. According to Hyson (2003), early childhood education has long called upon educators to uphold responsive and developmentally appropriate standards. The objection of many proponents of DAP is that most early childhood academic standards do not reflect the ways in which young children learn and develop. As such, “these standards have the potential to pose ‘educational and developmental risks’ for young learners” (Goldstein, 2007b, p. 381, citing National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2002, p. 2). Reflecting on the Common Core Standards [CCS] in particular, Bomer and Maloch (2011) have asserted:

There are probably few primary teachers who think of themselves as directly preparing their children for college and career. Most likely, they believe that supporting children in their curiosity about their world, the people around them, and the language in which they are continually bathed is a good preparation for later schooling, college, and career, not to mention for life more generally and everything that’s in it. But that’s not the theory of growth or

curriculum that is encoded in the CCS. (pp. 39-40)

As Stipek (2006) cautioned over a decade ago, attempts to standardize early childhood experiences may do “more harm than good by promoting educational practices that undermine children’s enthusiasm for learning, and, as a result, negatively affect their ultimate academic performance” (p. 456). Nonetheless, when it comes to determining whether developmentally appropriate practice can be incorporated into a standards-based curriculum, some scholars are more optimistic than others (Bassok et al., 2016; Bassok, Claessens, & Engel, 2014; Clements & Sarama, 2014).

In addition to shifting academic expectations (or perhaps because of these shifts), the amount of time kindergartners are engaged in free or structured play has also received attention from US researchers. Despite its many benefits, “...recent years have seen a steady decrease in the amount of time kindergarten classes devoted to play (Lynch, 2015, p. 348, citing Brownson et al. 2010; Frost 2008; Meisels & Shonko, 2000).” This decrease in time spent playing has been attributed in part to an increased emphasis placed upon preparing young children to do well on standardized tests and to meet academic standards (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hyun, 2003; Jeynes, 2006). Though some scholars argue that “play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels” (Elkind, 2007, p. 4), US school administrators and teachers, feeling pressure to increase test scores, may find it is necessary to reduce the amount of “free time” children are allotted during an already time-crunched school day.

As previously stated, many scholars would argue that play and academics are not incompatible. For example, Alford, Rollins, Padrón, and Waxman (2015) have written: “The concept of *play* for young learners has been



erroneously portrayed as directly oppositional to the more ‘worthy’ academic counterpart of academic *work*” (p. 10). Riley and Jones (2010) would agree that, “Learning and play do not have to be contradictory; learning can occur during times of play” (p. 149). Similarly, according to Katz (2015):

...the traditional debates in the field about whether to emphasize so-called free play or formal beginning academic instruction are not the only two options for the early childhood curriculum. Certainly some proportions of time can be given to both of those kinds of curriculum components. But in the early years, another major component of education – (indeed for all age groups) must be to provide a wide range of experiences, opportunities, resources and contexts that will provoke, stimulate, and support children’s innate intellectual dispositions. (p. 2)

In spite of this argument, and the fact that many teachers claim to be proponents of DAP, Alford et al. (2015) found that regardless of grade level, teachers were likely to use “whole class, didactic, teacher-centered instructional practices,” an approach that “discounts the range of differences and contexts that are present within an early childhood classroom” (p.

10). Furthermore, Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) found that even though many teachers employ the language of developmentally appropriate practice, they do not always enact these practices in the classroom. Alford et al. (2015) specifically linked the use of developmentally *inappropriate* practices to preparation for testing. According to Yoon (2015), “Instead of working in tandem, the tests and developmental theories are at odds with each other, specifically in the early grades” (p. 369). Nonetheless, Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) remind us that didactic methods and developmentally appropriate methods are not directly in opposition to one another; rather, these are two different instructional approaches that serve two different purposes (citing Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001; Stipek, Felier, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995).

If developmentally appropriate practice, which may incorporate play-based learning, should not be viewed as the *opposite* of didactic teaching methods, how might we break away from viewing the two as a binary? Figure 1, which depicts Miller and Almon’s (2009) continuum of kindergarten instructional approaches, ranging from highly *unstructured* free play to highly *structured* didactic instruction, provides one possible conception:

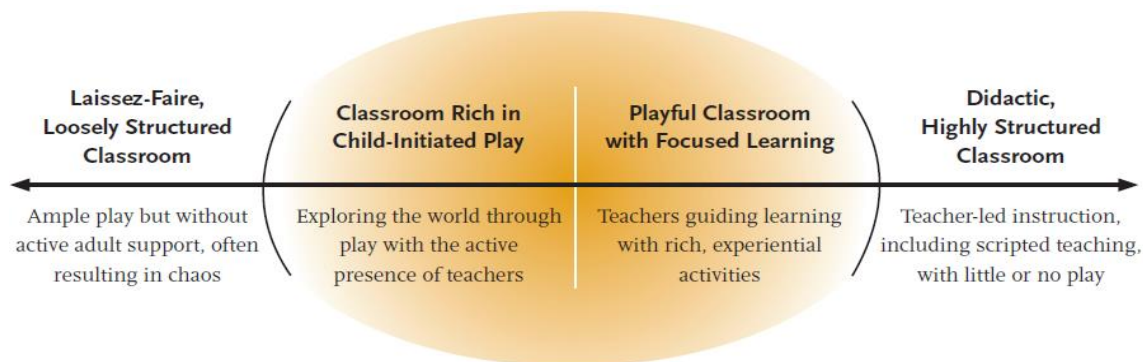


Figure 1. Continuum of approaches to kindergarten education (Miller & Almon, 2009).

According to Miller and Almon (2009), the optimal educational environment for kindergarten students combines play with a purpose, an environment where children, under the guidance of their teacher(s), can actively experience the world, learning concepts in ways that are meaningful and important to them. Snow (2013) would agree with this position. Such an environment echoes Dewey's (1938) philosophy of education grounded in experience, particularly the need for continuity and interaction across learning opportunities, as well as the important role of a skilled adult facilitator. From this perspective, the Common Core Standards are addressing only a piece of Dewey's vision, that of offering continuity across learning opportunities, and overlooking how learning opportunities should also be informed by children's personal and relational ways of being in the world.

To close this section, I feel it is also important to clarify the notion of developmentally appropriate practice, as it is somewhat paradoxical in nature. While holding itself at a far distance from standards-based instruction, DAP has been built upon a prescribed set of beliefs about the kind of instruction young children need. While on the one hand, this might underscore Hyson's (2003) point that early childhood education has always had *standards*, Moon and Reifel (2008), drawing on work from Dyson (1995) and Genishi, Dyson, and Fassler, (1994), have reminded us that "developmentally appropriate practice may not always look the same...in classrooms with diverse children" (p. 50). Alford et al. (2015) would add:

High-quality early childhood settings consider all the domains of a young child's development, not just cognition. The need for teachers to individualize and differentiate their instruction in ethnically, culturally, and

developmentally diverse environments is all but compulsory. Future ECE research and practice must utilize a more all-inclusive, farsighted approach towards young children's learning. Ultimately, the answer to providing effective instruction for young children lies in bridging the gap between developmentally appropriate and direct instruction and striking a successful balance between both ideologies and practices. (p. 11)

Therefore, considering the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse learners adds yet another dimension in this exploration of the changing nature and role of kindergarten post-NCLB. If developmentally appropriate pedagogy and positive learning outcomes are inextricably linked (Alford et al., 2015), is it also possible to teach a culturally and linguistically responsive, standards-based curriculum that meets the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of all children? This seems to be a tall order, even for the most seasoned and successful teacher, and an example of which research (to the best of my knowledge) has yet to locate and explicate.

### **The "Science" Behind NCLB and Kindergarten Literacy Instruction**

Within the context of the kindergarten literacy classroom, it would seem that prior to NCLB, children were expected to leave kindergarten *ready* to read, whereas since NCLB, children have been pushed to leave kindergarten *already reading* (Bassok et al., 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009; Yoon, 2015). Such a distinction demonstrates the difference between emergent readers, who understand important concepts about print and are experimenting with reading and writing, and early readers who, in addition to possessing a solid grasp of print concepts, have a bank of high frequency words upon which to draw, as well as a growing ability to decode

words that follow predictable sound-spelling patterns (Pinnell & Fountas, 2007). The expectation that children leave kindergarten already reading can be attributed to the goals of NCLB and the adoption of more rigorous academic standards that it inspired (Yoon, 2015).

Among its many ambitious goals, NCLB pushed a national initiative, *Reading First*, declaring that all US children should be proficient readers by third grade (White House, 2003). This initiative was largely informed by findings put forth by a group of researchers commissioned by the federal government, the National Reading Panel (NRP), in their report entitled *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Privileging reading research based on experimental and quasi-experimental designs (Cunningham, 2001), the NRP necessarily reduced reading to a *science* that can quantifiably be measured. As such, it is not surprising that one of the report's major takeaways was that effectively teaching reading depended upon explicit instruction in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, with a strong emphasis on the first three in the early grades (Bingham & Patton-Terry, 2013; Botzakis, Burns, & Hall, 2014; Paris, 2005). Although the conclusions drawn by the NRP received a substantial amount of criticism from leading reading experts (e.g., Allington, 2002; Cunningham, 2001; Paris, 2005), its impact on US classroom practice was highly consequential, as well as its influence on the future adoption of the Common Core Standards (Botzakis et al., 2014).

Post-NCLB, federal funding streams were directed toward states and districts that agreed to purchase reading programs and professional development models informed by scientifically-

based reading research (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). As such, US teachers, particularly those working with children from low-income and *minoritized* backgrounds, were pressured to prioritize code-based skills instruction in the early grades (Gee, 2013; Pearson, 2004; Pearson & Hiebert, 2010). Such a prioritization of decontextualized skills instruction (i.e., Street's [1995] "autonomous model of literacy") discounted decades of research informed by sociocultural and critical perspectives of literacy learning (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2013; Gee, 2004; 2013; Heath, 1982; Luke, 2013; The New London Group, 1996). Central to these perspectives is "an alternative, ideological model of literacy [that] offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another" (Street, 2008, p. 4). Sociocultural and critical perspectives call for educators to attend to the ways in which power, privilege, and context shape how people conceive of and use literacy/literacies, as much as educators attend to *how* the acts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are taken up by any one individual within any one group (e.g., Heath, 1982; Perry, 2012; Street, 1995).

In spite of research that has demonstrated the ideological nature of literacy, NCLB's *Reading First* initiative and (more recently) the adoption of the Common Core Standards have equated *literacy* to academic performance (Bomer & Maloch, 2011; Botzakis et al., 2014), or "the ability to read and write and compute in the form taught and expected in formal education" (Street, 1995, p. 107; citing Ogbu, 1990). This decontextualized approach to literacy development holds that learning to read and write is contingent upon students explicitly learning the *code* of the English language (Pearson, 2004; Pressley & Allington, 2014). Implicit within this autonomous literacy model is an assumption that there is a *right* way to interpret a text once it is decoded. One consequence of this model is that children come

to learn that the most important information gleaned from reading is located within the words on the page, not the responses that reading invokes within the reader (or a community of readers). The Common Core Standards are actually more explicit in this regard (Bomer & Maloch, 2011; Yatvin, 2012).

Researchers have noted that although developing code-related skills is important for future reading success, too much emphasis in the early grades “comes at the expense of emphases on the oral language skills of listening and speaking; skills related to vocabulary, composition, and comprehension” (Paris & Luo, 2010, p. 316). Decontextualized code-based skills instruction can be particularly detrimental for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, for whom skills instruction without a meaningful context is not only confusing, but counterproductive (Herrera, Perez, Escamilla, 2010; Yoon, 2015). Additionally, such a narrowly prescriptive response to a perceived national literacy problem overlooks a great deal of research on the social aspects of literacy and meaning-making (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), a response that may seem surprising given that “no field has witnessed more synthesis/consensus-seeking efforts [by researchers and policy-makers] than reading, particularly early reading research” (Pearson & Hiebert, 2010, p. 286).

In addition to the overemphasis on decontextualized skills instruction in kindergarten classrooms, Yoon (2015) found that the assessment data teachers used were based on conceptualizations of literacy learning as a linear path. Such data is necessarily reductionist in view because “language assessments and norm referenced tests simplify language to its basic parts” (Yoon, 2015, p. 390). Paris and Hoffman (2004) have criticized a “one-test-fits-all approach” to assessing early literacy because “a single assessment cannot adequately represent the complexity of a child’s

reading development...[and] a single assessment cannot capture the variety of skills and developmental levels of children in most K–3 classes” (p. 205). Adding to the problem, the ways in which assessment data are used in early childhood classrooms can prove troublesome for those concerned with educational equity. Since NCLB, the increased use of standardized assessments in kindergarten classrooms has arguably led to an increased use of homogenous grouping (e.g., ability grouping) to provide at least a portion of students’ daily instruction. Catsambis and Buttaro (2012), who analyzed the psycho-social aspects of ability grouping, have noted that:

[Our] findings support what skeptics of ability grouping have said all along; that ability grouping benefits only children in high ability groups... the psycho-social effects of this instructional practice can actually contribute to achievement gaps by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status that tend to increase as students move from kindergarten to the third grade (citing Tach & Farkas, 2006; Fryer & Levitt 2006).

Thus the research on changes in literacy instruction post-NCLB paints a troubling picture for all early childhood educators, but especially those who work with children from low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. While proponents of NCLB may have argued that these are the very children the policy intended to support, observations of classroom practice and analysis of assessment data in the wake of NCLB suggest otherwise.

### **If Kindergarten Was Left Behind, Where Do We Go From Here?**

In her history of early childhood education, Beatty (1995) noted, “Practice tends to go through cycles, pushing young children too hard and too fast and then letting up again in response to adult concerns” (p. 205). In the US, we may be at a crossroads, a point in time when

we must decide just how much we are willing to let up when it comes to demanding that all children meet higher academic standards if we also insist they be taught in ways that reflect their developmental, cultural, and linguistic needs and abilities. Perhaps we need to forge a more expansive trail that considers not only what and how our youngest children are taught, but why we send them to public schools in the first place. Such considerations will help to reveal whose interests education policies are (and are not) serving.

As Russell (2011) has noted, “Educators are embedded in a cultural environment where ideas are publicly framed and debated, shaping parental expectations, policymakers’ rulemaking, and perhaps educators’ beliefs about what constitutes legitimate professional practices” (p. 259). This literature review supports such an insight. Research has yet to offer definitive conclusions or even provide universal examples of how kindergarteners might best be instructed because, of course, the question echoed in the epigraph of this article remains: “Best for what?” (and I would add, best for whom?) Researchers must devote increased attention to studying the ways in which teachers’ classroom practices represent their response to such questions, and how research might support, challenge, and/or shift this response. Policymakers then must use this research, informed by the perspectives of early childhood practitioners, parents, and children, when designing policies that impact our youngest learners. Equity-minded policy-makers would be wise to recognize that our seemingly relentless national and global emphasis on standardization, high-stakes accountability, and children’s future economic productivity have only further extended the distance between the *have’s* and *have not’s* in our society.

This literature review reveals the complicated nature of teaching and learning in kindergarten in the wake of NCLB; researchers and policymakers alike must recognize this

complexity. Kindergarten teachers are faced with the challenging task of meeting academic standards, nurturing children’s social and emotional needs, while also teaching in ways that are culturally, linguistically, and developmentally responsive. Students arrive in kindergarten eager and willing to learn, but with vastly different experiences that may or may not have prepared them for the educational context within which they find themselves. Parents and families want the best for their children, but unless they are well-versed in the research on child development and early childhood education, they must rely on information provided by others in order to make most educational decisions.

Many educators and parents—myself included—would agree that the kindergarten classroom into which today’s five and six year olds walk looks and feels very different from the kindergarten of decades past. Whether these differences are for the better, or for the worse, depends on who you ask. Nonetheless, understanding how kindergarten might better serve all learners has utility beyond helping to resolve differences in parents’, teachers’, researchers’, and/or policymakers’ ideological or pedagogical beliefs. Debates centered on education are always personal, because the consequences of ill-informed education policies land squarely on the shoulders of *our* children. In other words, focusing future research (and policy decisions) on the questions of “Best for whom?” and “Best for what?” is not only important, but essential.

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