



Kindergarten Then and Now: Perceptions of Ten Long Term Teachers

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Abstract

This article compares developmental kindergartens of the past to current academic kindergartens through the voices of kindergarten teachers who taught in both types. Data were obtained from interviews of ten public school kindergarten teachers from California with experience in kindergarten ranging 18–34 years ($M = 24$). Teachers indicated that many of their students succeed in an academic program; however, students who are not competent in oral language when they enter kindergarten often struggle during kindergarten and beyond. Teachers described a rushed and stressful curriculum for both themselves and their students. Most participants believed that the English Language Arts Standards were too numerous to master, except by their most ready students. They believed that large classes, excessive testing, a short day, and lack of a partner teacher inhibit the achievement of unprepared students. It was generally agreed that the prior kindergarten structure, a transition from home to school, had advantages for the well-rounded development of young children.

Keywords Academic kindergarten · Developmental kindergarten · Teacher stress · Student frustration · Oral language · Reading achievement

Introduction

The traditional developmental kindergarten is a relic. Bassok and Latham (2016) found that since 1998, time spent in literacy instruction has increased, likewise, so has the difficulty of the literacy content. They found substantial reductions in time for art, music and science. In addition, fewer activity centers were present in classrooms. The authors reported that in 2010, 30% of public school kindergarten teachers used standardized tests at least once a month which was 2.6 times more often than first grade teachers used these tests in 1999.

Similarly, Brown (2018) found that kindergarten students spend more time in academics and less time at play than they did 20 years ago. He wrote that this rush towards academics in kindergarten can negatively affect later learning. He continued that recess helps restore the children's attention when they return to the classroom for continued learning. Ginsburg (2019) stated that play is important in school as it attends to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of students. He contends that play enhances student

confidence and resiliency—skills children will need for future challenges.

Kindergarten arose from the belief that children do not grow evenly or on a time schedule. Since it is often the first experience with school for many children; the purpose was to ease the transition between home and school. Strategies were creative, active, and oral language based. Activities included reading aloud, discussions, music, art, exploration, drama, and play. The physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development of the child was of utmost importance. In contrast, academic kindergartens emphasize literacy and numeracy, and paper and pencil tasks often replace learning through language and hands on activities. Children are expected to reach the standards at year end regardless of their language ability or maturity when school began. Abbott (2017) wrote that the focus on standards has caused many schools to abandon the teaching of science and social studies. In addition, she stated that the focus on math and reading foundational skills will result in students unable to think critically across disciplines.

An unintended consequence of a standards based academic kindergarten is that the focus is not on the social and the emotional development of children. Jones et al. (2015) found statistically significant associations between social-emotional skills of students, as rated by their

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kindergarten teachers, and young adult outcomes across several domains including education, employment, and mental health. The authors stated that success in school involves both social–emotional and cognitive skills; furthermore, positive attitudes and motivation are required to complete educational milestones. Similarly, Hanover Research (2016) found that early skills in literacy and math are the most significant predictors of future academic success; however, social competence and self-regulation also contribute. These non-academic skills have been shown to impact reading scores as far up as middle school, according to the authors. They acknowledged that literacy instruction is complex and multi-faceted and should be differentiated and guided by continued assessment.

The Reading/Language Arts Standards for California Public Schools were adopted by the state board of education in November of 1997. The Reading/Language Arts Framework (1999) contains the standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade. Prior to the adoption of these standards, students were not expected to read in kindergarten. Oral language was developed then and reading readiness was taught with alphabet activities, rhyming activities, and children’s literature. With the standards children were expected to know the letters, the consonant sounds, the short vowel sounds, simple one-syllable high-frequency words, and read simple sentences. The connectedness of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are evident in the standards; however, in kindergarten, the vast majority of standards are in the reading domain. The kindergarten standards contain 26 for reading, four for writing, two for written and oral English conventions, and six for listening and speaking. The prerequisite skills of listening and speaking were not emphasized in the kindergarten standards.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010) represent a collaborative effort by the National Governors’ Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to create kindergarten through twelfth grade standards to ensure that all students are ready for college and/or career literacy by the end of high school. Although similar to the California standards, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are more rigorous and include the reading of informational texts as well as literature. The CCSS for kindergarten reading have 10 standards in reading for literature, 10 for reading informational texts, and 15 for foundational reading skills. However, with CCSS, students are now expected to read emergent-reader texts and grasp long vowels sounds as well. Oral language standards are embedded in the comprehension and collaboration section, the writing and the speaking sections, and the vocabulary acquisition sections adding 40 or more standards.

Academic standards, school district policy, and testing often place kindergarten teachers in a predicament: teach the curriculum or teach what is developmentally appropriate

(Graue 2009; Gullo and Hughes 2010). The kindergarten curriculum focuses on reading achievement and teachers are required to teach reading to all students, including those who are unfamiliar with school procedures, letters, and books. Many students do not possess sufficient language to make sense of formal reading instruction.

Some believe that too much emphasis on reading and writing thwarts the development of kindergarten students’ oral language development (Carlsson-Paige et al. 2015). They believed that active learning experiences and play develop vocabulary and establish a foundation for reading. The authors stated that the CCSS have set unrealistic reading goals for kindergarten students. The danger according to the authors is that students unable to achieve at this level become frustrated and demoralized. The authors felt that the CCSS should be withdrawn from kindergarten and rewritten developmentally.

Pondisco (2015) agreed that kindergarten should not be an academic pressure cooker; however, he refuted the suggestion to withdraw the standards. He stated that the reading standards in kindergarten are not harmful and that CCSS defines reading emergent texts as sight words and consonant–vowel–consonant words and provided the following example; “I am Sam and I am an ant.” A closer reading of the CCSS kindergarten standards reveals that kindergarten students are expected to master long vowel sounds and their common spellings as well, for instance; “I am Nate and I am a bear.” Long vowels sounds have many spelling patterns, vowel teams, and silent letters. Nonetheless, Pondisco wrote that it is possible to have both a play-based kindergarten and a language-rich kindergarten.

Children hear in the womb and most of them speak their first words around 1 year of age. The ability to communicate is the most meaningful and fundamental of all human abilities. Reading, the foundational skill for other subjects, traditionally was not taught until first grade, arguably, for this very reason—to develop the children’s listening and speaking skills in kindergarten.

Because oral language assessment is not routine in kindergarten and a reliable instrument does not exist for this age group (Pearson, 2000), the underdeveloped oral language of many students may be mistakenly interpreted as a reading difficulty. It is not uncommon for kindergarten students in California to be pulled out of class to attend Response to Intervention (RTI) classes for reading. RTI is a three-tiered program that helps students who struggle with the core curriculum. Oral language is a prerequisite to learning to read and, although the processes are reciprocal, oral language must be sufficiently developed prior to reading instruction (Snow et al. 2005). Oral language has not been given much emphasis in the kindergarten English Language Arts (ELA) standards, which is peculiar considering that the relationship between oral language and reading has been

established. Perhaps the underlying assumption is that kindergarten students were already competent in oral language, or as Biemiller (1999) suggested, reading is much easier to assess than oral language.

The limited time spent in the content areas in today's kindergarten classrooms may further thwart oral language development. Phonics worksheets and phonemic awareness activities do little to develop oral language, are abstract, and are not as interesting to five-year-olds as science, social studies and the arts are. Of utmost concern then is the teaching of reading before the language of students is sufficiently developed. Children competent in oral language would most likely be developmentally ready for phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. Both of these necessary components of reading are abstract; but according to Bruner (1990), language develops concretely first, initially out of needs and wants. Abstract language develops later. An obvious gap in the literature regarding oral language development and reading achievement in kindergarten is the lack of studies that solicit the expertise of practitioners on this issue. Excellent kindergarten teachers have specialized knowledge and an intuitive sense of what is developmentally appropriate.

Kindergarten students are diverse; they begin school with vast differences in oral language skills, reading readiness, and experience with letters and books. In addition, educational policies regarding class size, partner teaching, length of school day, testing, and kindergarten classroom size vary considerably and may impact kindergarten students' success. Of concern is whether kindergarten teachers believe that educational policy and ELA standards are enhancing or inhibiting the oral language development and subsequent reading achievement. Besides ensuring proficiency in ELA, the role of California educators, according to the Reading/Language Arts Framework, is to instill a love of reading, joy in communication, and a deep appreciation of text (CDE 1999). If kindergarten is no longer a transitional grade and reading instruction begins immediately, some children may develop negative feelings towards reading if they are struggling.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine public school kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the shift in the kindergarten curriculum from developmental to academic from those who taught in both types. In addition, policies affecting student success; class size, partner teaching, classroom size, testing, length of school day, and RTI were discussed. This study is unique in that the perceptions of teachers who taught prior to and with the California State Standards (1997) and were transitioning to the Common Core State Standards (2010) were elicited. Only these long term

teachers can give insight into the impact of this shift on their students. The key questions were:

1. In what ways do kindergarten teachers perceive that ELA standards and policies impact the oral language development and reading achievement of their students?
2. What do kindergarten teachers perceive regarding their students' oral language development and competence?
3. What are kindergarten teachers' perceptions regarding the reading curriculum and the instructional strategies they use for their students?
4. What are kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the effects of the ELA standards on the oral language development and subsequent reading achievement of kindergarten students?
5. How do kindergarten teachers perceive the influence of policies (i.e., class size, classroom size, partner teaching, length of school day, district reading assessments, and response to intervention) on the oral language development and reading achievement of kindergarten students?

Methodology

Research Approach

Phenomenology was the method chosen for this study. Patton (2002) noted that this type of qualitative research allows participants to share their "lived experience" (p. 105). By conducting in-depth interviews with long term teachers I hoped to understand their various experiences stemming from the many configurations of today's academic kindergartens and the developmental kindergartens of the past.

The Researcher

Glesne (2011) wrote that a researcher's role is that of a learner as well as a researcher. Although I am familiar with teaching kindergarten, I did not embark on this study as an expert; rather, I sought to learn about the impact of changes that have occurred in kindergarten from teachers with extensive experience who taught kindergarten before it was academic.

I taught kindergarten for seven years but only after the curriculum was driven by the standards. Prior to teaching kindergarten, I was a reading specialist and worked with first grade struggling readers. I found that the paper and pencil tasks that had become common place in kindergarten resembled tasks previously reserved for first grade. Clearly, my bias was that foundational reading skills are abstract and complex and many kindergarten students were not ready for reading instruction. Glesne (2011)

Table 1 Background characteristics of teacher interview participants (N = 10)

Pseudonym	Years in K	No. of students	K class-room	Schedule	Assistance	Partner teacher	School ranking*
Mary	34	22	Yes	Full	Volunteers	No	Yellow
Dora	28	31	Yes	1/2 day, Staggered	Volunteers	No	Orange
Zarina	28	20	Yes	Extended	Aide, volunteers	No	Yellow
Ann	28	31	Yes	1/2 day	Volunteers	No	Green
Anastasia	27	31	No	1/2 day, Staggered	Aide, volunteers	No	Orange
Christine	20	32	Yes	1/2 day	Volunteers	No	Blue
Marilyn	20	25	Yes	Extended	Volunteers	No	Blue
Patty	19	24	Yes	1/2 day	Volunteers	Yes	Blue
Michelle	19	31	Yes	1/2 day	Volunteers	No	Blue
Lynn	18	27	Yes	Full	Volunteers	No	Yellow

*Red is lowest performance, then orange, yellow, green, to blue which is highest performance

suggested three steps to countering bias, the first of which is to acknowledge it. Another is to interview teachers with differing views; therefore, I interviewed teachers from high, middle, and low performing schools. A third is to employ multiple sites, thus, I interviewed teachers in my district of employment and from five other districts.

Additionally, the questions in the interview protocol were open-ended and unbiased, and I did not reveal my bias to the participants. I practiced “reflexive thought” throughout this study, which Glesne (2011) defined as “understanding ways in which your personal characteristics, values, and positions interact with others in the research situation to influence the methodological approach you take, the methods you use, and the interpretations you make” (p. 159).

Participants

Five teachers representing four schools in a district in San Bernardino County where I was employed were invited to participate. Four additional participants responded to the request for an interview after having received the email letter I sent to them through the California Kindergarten Association. They taught in Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Clara County, and Sonoma Counties. A tenth participant, found through networking, also taught in Los Angeles County. They were all long term public school kindergarten teachers having taught from 18 to 34 years ($M = 24$). Four were from high performing schools, three from middle performing schools, and three from low performing schools. See Table 1 for participants’ background characteristics and school rankings.

Data Sources, Collection and Analysis

The interviews consisted of 12 open-ended questions, a sentence completion activity, and a ranking activity. The interview protocol was checked for content, clarity, and bias by two retired kindergarten teachers and a retired speech pathologist from a public school district in southern California. A practice interview was conducted with a current kindergarten teacher. The interview protocol was also reviewed by the qualitative methodologist on my dissertation committee and modified based on that feedback.

Participants who met the criteria of teaching before and with the standards and agreed to be interviewed were asked to sign the consent form. The ethical procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board of Azusa Pacific University were followed. During the interview, I asked the participants to choose a pseudonym. Nine interviews were conducted in person and one by email. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 min. Eight participants agreed to be audio taped. Responses were transcribed and analyzed.

The analysis of data was done through code mapping (Anfara et al. 2002). The first iteration contained repeated phrases, the second iteration grouped these phrases into broad categories, and the third iteration combined these categories into themes. Two maps were created. Categories that surfaced are represented by the letters A and B. The numbers 2, 3, 4, and 5 refer to the research questions. Question 1, the overarching question, was not mapped. See Tables 2 and 3.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from this research illustrate the shift in kindergarten from developmental to academic based on the perceptions of the ten teacher participants. Since the participants taught in both types of kindergartens their views have the

Table 2 Code mapping: three iterations of analysis

CODE MAPPING FOR ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING	
(Research Questions 2 and 3)	
RQ #2 What do K teachers perceive regarding their students’ oral language development and competence?	RQ #3 What are K teachers' perceptions regarding the reading curriculum and instructional strategies they use?
(THIRD ITERATION: THEMES)	
2. Oral Language Interactions Precede Oral Language Competence 3. The Kindergarten Curriculum is Standards-Based Not Developmental	
(SECOND ITERATION: CATEGORIES)	
2A. Less Opportunities to Develop Oral Language	3A. Academics Replace Developmental Activities
2B. Oral Language Competence of Students is Limited	3B. Curriculum is Advanced and Rigid
(FIRST ITERATION: REPEATED PHRASES)	
2A. Less parent/child communication	3A. Development of child ignored
2A. No time for class discussions	3A. Discovery/hands –on limited
2A. Limited peer interaction	3A. Relationships not established
2A. Writing own stories vs. telling stories	3A. Play virtually eliminated
2B. Listening not developed	3B. Kids struggle
2B. Limited vocabulary	3B. No time for differentiation
2B. Lack of experiences	3B. Highly academic
2B. More ELL students	3B. Stressful curriculum

Read from bottom up

Table 3 Code mapping: three iterations of analysis

CODE MAPPING FOR ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING	
(Research Questions 4 and 5)	
RQ #4 What are K teachers’ perceptions of the effect of ELA standards on oral language development and reading achievement?	RQ #5 How do K teachers perceive whether policies enhance or inhibit students’ oral language development and reading achievement?
(THIRD ITERATION: THEMES)	
4. Academics Begin at the Start of Kindergarten Regardless of Readiness of Students 5. The Context Determines the Effectiveness of Educational Policy	
(SECOND ITERATION: CATEGORIES)	
4A. Students with Underdeveloped Language Are Frustrated	5A. Class Size, Curriculum, and Testing Impact Learning
4B. Ready Students are High Achievers	5B. Policy Effectiveness Varies
(FIRST ITERATION: REPEATED PHRASES)	
4A. Unready students are frustrated	5A. Curriculum must be engaging
4A. Decoding w/o comprehension	5A. Class size reduction is needed
4A. Sound/symbol too abstract	5A. Testing should be reduced
4B. Long vowels for ready students	5B. K classroom vs. small room
4B. Ready students read	5B. Teacher created RTI vs. RTI
4B. Ready students write	5B. Partner/aide/volunteers
4B. Standards guide instruction	5B. ½ day/staggered/extended/full

Read from bottom up

unique advantage of being first-hand accounts. Participants graciously shared their “lived experiences” but, at the same time, their statements are not to be interpreted as statements of fact. Teacher perceptions will be discussed in four broad areas: oral language competence, curriculum, ELA standards, and educational policy.

Oral Language Competence Nine of the 10 interview participants stated that the oral language development of children requires interaction. They reported a reduction in parent, teacher, and peer interaction. Three teachers perceived that parents talk less to their children than ever before. Ann stated, “I’ve noticed a huge difference in their language the last few years; parents don’t talk to their kids anymore.” Zarina described, “Savvy technology-wise kids living in a fast paced society” as limiting both their attention spans and the verbal exchanges. Mary said, “Many children come to school not knowing their colors, counting beyond one or two, and rarely know any alphabet letters. Dora explained, “If students don’t come with experiences, when you’re reading a story, they don’t get the comprehension. You are talking about something foreign to them. For instance, the story about the jack-in-the-box, they didn’t know what it was, so I brought one in, we talked about what it does. I miss that.... That is all gone. It is so limited; teacher: student interaction; student: student interaction.”

Seven teachers perceived that peer interaction occurs less often in an academic kindergarten than in a developmental one. Anastasia explained, “They can’t play; play developed their oral language by talking to each other, now the academics are structured and extreme.”

Four teachers noted that developing the oral language of their students used to take the form of a child telling a story as the teacher wrote it down. Mary shared, “I used to love their stories. Some could write their own but now it is an expectation. Some kids are turned off because they cannot do it.”

Lynn believed there is not enough time to develop listening, “My retired colleagues used to do a lot with nursery rhymes; rhythm that develops phonemic awareness. There is not enough time to develop that in kindergarten.”

Seven teachers believed that promoting the development of the oral language of kindergarten students requires time, experiences, and/or adult interaction. Patty stated promoting oral language “Requires instruction in the conventions of conversation like turn taking and think time.”

Curriculum Seven participants reported that developmental strategies are disappearing from their classrooms and have been replaced with phonics, phonemic awareness, and reading lessons. These teachers stated that in the developmental kindergartens of the past, they used the strategies of discovery, exploration, experiences, and play. In addition, some said they use to have time for flannel board stories and dramatic readings.

Patty, who teaches half-day kindergarten, stated she still schedules daily play, what she calls “choice time.” She said, “If they take away choice time where kids can pick what they want to do so they can interact and play, I will stop teaching kindergarten.” Lynn, who teaches a full day, stated, “I do hands-on learning, science center, discovery center, exploration stations, and dramatic play center.” Likewise, Marilyn said that teaching on an extended day schedule allows her to use “math manipulatives and hands-on science activities.” Six teachers reported that they have removed the toys from their classroom and/or eliminated or greatly reduced choice time.

Half mentioned that they covertly teach developmentally by closing their doors. Christine said, “The pressure they put on us makes it difficult. Once I close my door, I am fine.” Michelle stated, “I keep it a secret that I teach developmentally.” Ann explained the value of developmental activities, “Every child grows differently; we don’t really know how that is. They need to go through discovery and learn things through their own process. Our job is to give them the opportunity to do that and teach them how to learn.”

All of the participants mentioned that the curriculum is rushed and/or stressful. Patty, who taught first grade for seven years, stated that the kindergarten curriculum is the prior first grade curriculum. Five teachers stated that the pace of the curriculum does not allow for differentiation of instruction which is problematic for young students or those with underdeveloped language. When asked about the shift from a developmental to an academic program, Lynn immediately responded, “That question evokes a lot of emotion! The biggest difference is they want us to teach content on the first day; no time to establish relationships or the environment.” Four teachers noted the positive aspects of academics. See Table 4, positive comments are in italics.

Regarding instructional strategies for developing oral language, seven teachers mentioned the importance of modeling through teacher talk, and six stated that it is important to get the kids talking. Half reminisced about how effective the strategy of thematic teaching was for developing language, but that it was nearly impossible to teach that way due to the academic curriculum or the requirement to use the district curriculum guides. Likewise, five teachers reported that classroom play required peer interaction and thus developed language. Dora explained, “Play allowed talking, in a natural way... I could hear the development of their speech. I could walk around and hear them talking at centers. I would take my note pad and make notes of what they needed to know.”

ELA Standards Eight teachers perceived that the standards can hinder the enthusiasm for learning if students were not ready for the academic rigors of kindergarten. Participants revealed that an academic kindergarten can frustrate unprepared students.

Table 4 How do you feel about the shift from a developmental to an academic kindergarten?

Pseudonym (years)	Opinion
Mary (34)	“We have lost the child. We are not allowing the child to be a child anymore.... They have lost the teacher–child relationship. They are pushing way too hard too fast; <i>for some it is good</i> . There are many who cannot; especially the young child”
Ann (28)	“Terrible, awful, huge shift overnight, development of child is ignored now...It is all from the book or curriculum guide now; for some magical reason they should know it then; no process of getting there; no discussion. We are doing the kids a disservice”
Dora (28)	“I don’t like it; I do backtracking with my kids. I have to provide the language and experiences before I go there”
Zarina (28)	“Shameful, detrimental, disrespectful to the child’s individuality; skips developmental stages, children who skip crawling and walk have problems later”
Anastasia (27)	“I don’t like it. That age level should not be forced to do academics”
Christine (20)	“Try not to do too much paper and pencil, kids are not ready”
Marilyn (20)	“I liked it the way it was in a lot of ways; children learn under a lot more pressure now. <i>The kids have risen to the challenge; I am amazed at what they can do</i> . I would like to balance it”
Patty (19)	“ <i>There are parts of it I like; it has made me a more thoughtful teacher</i> . I think it is rigid and moves too fast. They need more time to explore and play with language”
Michelle (19)	“Only one-fourth of the kids are ready; the average kindergartener is not ready”
Lynn (18)	“ <i>We have literacy guides, we are supposed to do a read-aloud each day, we are supposed to ask thinking questions, connecting to your personal experience questions, that’s good for oral language development</i> . I don’t like that there is no time to differentiate instruction. Everything is within a time frame. If the kids don’t get it, there is no time to slow down, or catch a teachable moment. That’s a huge disadvantage. It is a travesty, really”

Zarina said, “Kids who can jump through the hoops are excited about learning, those not, become less confident and self-esteem drops, no one tries if they feel they can’t do it.” Ann stated that the standards are scheduled whether kids are ready or not and shared, “The kids feel bad; it sets it up for the rest of their schooling.” Similarly, Mary said, “If they don’t have the oral language there is no way they are going to get into reading, and that’s where we have problems.” Both Anastasia and Christine believed that more children cry now than before the standards. Additionally, Mary and Marilyn noted that the parents of children who do not master the standards are frustrated as well.

In contrast, Lynn stated, “Kids love it, parents love it. I ask the parents if the kids are happy. It has nothing to do with the standards; it has to do with how I run my class. I can think of playful ways to teach the standards.”

Some teachers reported that that covering all the standards caused them frustration as well. Anastasia, who taught at the lowest performing school of the participants, stated that “My enthusiasm has lessened due to the stress of teaching things they are not ready for.” Marilyn, who taught at a high performing school explained, “I am amazed at what they can do, but it is stressful for me and stressful for them.” Five others reported that their enthusiasm has remained high despite the fact that they can no longer be creative, have as much fun, and/or feel guilty for teaching developmentally.

Mary shared: “Before we had standards— not the high standards we have now. We took the child from where they were. We had a much more rounded child because of that. I don’t like it if we teachers do not have kids reading at the first grade level at the end of kindergarten—we have failed.”

At the other end of the spectrum, Lynn said, “My enthusiasm has shot through the roof since the implementation of the standards. Standards give me a roadmap where to go. It is a structure. I like structure, so different back in 1987 and 1988. There was nothing like that. What do I teach? I think there are some dusty old books over there. I feel more secure, more straightforward. I keep play in learning. I am learning how to do that with the standards. It might be difficult to do with half-day kindergarten.”

Lynn and Patty believed that standards are a positive guiding force. However, Lynn explained that the standards should also emphasize curiosity, imagination, innovation, creativity and problem solving. Six teachers commented that the standards have caused kindergarten to become unbalanced to such an extent that the social skills children need are no longer developed in kindergarten. Michelle explained, “We are so academic now; we are not focused on the social, sharing, getting along, or working together.”

Educational Policy Teachers overwhelmingly stated that keeping class size small is the most beneficial policy that enhances the achievement of their students. Specifically, five teachers believed that small classes enable small group instruction and enable students and teachers to have conversations. Anastasia said, “I used to know in my head what every child needed when I had a smaller class.” Marilyn explained, “Class size is huge! With 20 or fewer students, every child can read to you. With extended day... we had to give up our partner teacher.”

Nine of the participants taught in a kindergarten classroom as specified in the California Education Code. A kindergarten classroom is a classroom and a half in size, has

bathrooms, direct access to the kindergarten playground, and appropriately sized furniture and sinks. Only Anastasia taught in a classroom not designed for kindergarten. She did not have bathrooms in her classroom, space for both individual desks and learning centers, or direct access to the kindergarten playground. Most teachers were surprised by the question, as they have always taught in a kindergarten classroom. Despite that, Lynn felt she could not teach kindergarten properly without a “quintessential kindergarten classroom,” a point also made by Marilyn.

Having a partner teacher was generally agreed to be helpful to developing oral language and reading. Anastasia said, “A partner teacher is superior to an aide because they have training and are especially helpful when working with the kids who are struggling. No more ability groups because of big classes without a partner. My assigned aide, who comes 45 minutes four times a week, has had no training working with kindergarten students.”

Of the participants in the interviews, only Patty had a partner teacher. Her school had morning and afternoon kindergarten classes; consequently, there were two teachers available for each kindergarten class. Patty believed that class size is the most important policy followed by the presence of a partner teacher. In contrast, Zarina said, “A partner teacher can be great but often partners are not chosen by the people involved! I have not had the pleasure of a partner teacher who is on the same page in regards with how to work with children.”

Three teachers reported that all kindergarten classes at their schools are on morning session so that in the afternoon the kindergarten teachers can perform other duties such as teaching RTI, substitute teaching, or attending Student Study Meetings. All of the teachers use volunteers in the classroom, but Dora said, “Sometimes the parents haven’t developed their own oral language...many of my students’ parents are incarcerated, they live with grandparents...I don’t get the help I used to get.”

The value of extending length of the school day provoked various opinions. Ann said, “Kids burn out after 3 hours and then they start to misbehave.” Michelle, who piloted full day for 1 year said, “It was dangerous on the kindergarten playground, with all the students on the same recess, too long of a day; kids needed a nap.” She suggested that an extended day would be better. Zarina liked the extended day and explained, “I have really enjoyed having a longer day with my children. I felt like the longer time allowed me to keep using some of the successful activities, methods, and approaches; and I could teach at a more natural pace.” Similarly, Dora said, “Full day was better for the kids because in the afternoon I could do all the things that kindergarten should be; they painted, they dictated their stories to me, it got them talking again in a natural way, but it was exhausting for me.”

Anastasia reported that when she was teaching on a staggered half-day schedule she could easily differentiate instruction. Half of Anastasia’s students arrive at school 90 minutes early and leave 90 minutes earlier than the others. However, she believed that a partner teacher was still superior to this arrangement.

Nine teachers reported that district reading assessments hindered the achievement of their students. The overall consensus was that there was too much too often. Lynn said, “I had to stop teaching the last month of school to complete the testing; 1:1 time with each child, while the others did busy work.” Michelle said, “1:1 tests on the computer while the others are running around, so many kids, too many assessments, and too often.” Mary said, “I am testing each child 45–60 min each four times a year; it is horrid!” Christine explained, “It takes two and a half hours 1:1 on the computer for testing. You can assess all along, you know which kids need to know their ABCs.”

In contrast, Patty, the only participant with a partner teacher, said, “Testing helps me guide my instruction. Formative assessments help me where to go from here.” Perhaps her partner teacher helped with the testing, the other participants did not have that advantage.

Three teachers responded that RTI is helpful only when teachers can design their own program based on each individual child’s needs. Ann suggested that an effective RTI would be “Sitting in a small group talking with the teacher.” She explained that her school did a phonics program for RTI and that it helped only one in 10 of the children in the program, “If they are not ready to read, they are just not ready!” Three teachers believed that imposed curriculums for kindergarten intervention were a hindrance to student achievement. Michelle said, “Our RTI after school has been tremendous; the district gave us a scripted program but we didn’t like it; we added our own curriculum.”

Five teachers described how detrimental requirements are when placed on teachers, such as when and what books they can read, teaching strategies they must employ, and requiring kids to know the standards. Patty explained, “With the latest reading adoption, there is a big push for fidelity; to make sure we follow the teacher’s guide. That makes it hard. For instance, this week we were going to the pumpkin patch so reading *Peter’s Chair* was not a priority for me. I would rather be reading books about how pumpkins grow. I can’t teach thematically; I must stick to an order.” Lynn stated, “Charting [standards] is meaningless in kindergarten. It replaces student work that should be hanging up.” Similarly, Michelle said, “We have to write the standards on the board. The principal will come in and ask the kids what standard they are working on. The kids answer and she says, ‘Can you tell me in a sentence?’ They can only say one word.”

The participants were asked to rank the effectiveness of selected educational policies. See Table 5 for the rankings.

Table 5 Ranking activity of effectiveness of educational policy

Pseudonym	Class size	Partner teacher	Kindergarten classroom	Length of day	ELA testing	Other
Ann	2	3	4	5	6	1 curriculum
Anastasia	2	1	3	5	4	
Christine	1	2	3	4	5	
Dora	2	1	3	4	5	
Lynn	1	2	3	4	6	5 parent help
Marilyn	1	4	2	3	5	
Mary	3	1	2	4	4	
Michelle	1	3	5	2	4	
Patty	1	2	3	5	4	
Zarina	2	5	4	3	6	1 curriculum
Mean	1.6	2.4	3.2	3.9	4.9	

1 means most helpful

Table 6 Comparison of extreme cases of interview participants

Characteristics	Patty	Anastasia
Class size	24	31
Classroom Facilities	K classroom	regular, no bathrooms
Assistance	partner teacher	aide 45 min/4x week
Year school built	2003	1953
School rank	blue	orange
Low SES	7%	67%
ELL	13%	26%
Ethnicity of students	78% Asian	80% Hispanic
Teacher description of parents	most are engineers in the Silicon Valley	most hold factory, office, or sales jobs or are unemployed

Patty’s and Anastasia’s rankings of the effectiveness of policies were remarkably similar. Both taught on a half-day schedule; however, Anastasia’s day was staggered and Patty had a partner teacher. Patty taught in a new school in Northern California in an exclusive neighborhood of million dollar homes. Anastasia taught in an old school in Southern California in a neighborhood of older homes and apartments near a prison. The needs of their students, the conditions they worked in, and the achievement of their students were very different. See Table 6 for a side by side comparison.

Collectively, these teachers have logged 214 years in kindergarten classrooms. They taught in six school districts and in five counties; from Northern to Southern California. Their schools ranged from low performing to extremely high performing, class size ranged from 20 to 32, and the length of their instructional day ranged from half to full day. The schools were diverse in the ethnicities of students, as well as the socioeconomic status and educational levels of the parents. Although their perceptions aren’t necessarily the views of the researcher, they are the lived experiences of the participants and a reflection of the changes in kindergarten.

Summary

Kindergarten has changed considerably since its inception as a transition from home to school. Teachers reported that the child’s garden envisioned by Frederick Froebel is barely recognizable. Participants expressed concerns about the readiness of some of their students for academics and the pace and content of the current kindergarten literacy curriculum. Four main themes emerged from the interviews.

Oral Language Interactions Precede Oral Language Competence

Teachers believed that there are fewer opportunities to develop oral language both in school and at home. As kindergarten became more academic, teachers reported that paper and pencil activities replaced playing, painting, exploration, discovery, movement, singing, and other developmental activities that promoted oral language development in a natural way. In addition, some teachers perceived that

an increase in technology use, family stress, and extra-curricular activities are home factors decreasing oral language interaction.

The Kindergarten Curriculum is Standards Based Not Developmental

Reading is taught in kindergarten despite the fact that teachers perceived that without a good command of language, learning to read is difficult. Teachers reported that they have seen frustration in their unready students. In addition, the curriculum, perceived as the former first grade curriculum, is rushed and stressful, especially for those teaching on a half-day schedule according to the participants.

Academics Begin at the Start of Kindergarten Regardless of Readiness of Students

If kindergarten curriculum *is* the former first grade curriculum, then many teachers are presenting curriculum written for a full day, on a half-day schedule, to children a year younger. Children who enter kindergarten ready for academics learn how to read, how to write, and amazed the teachers in this project. Unfortunately, unprepared students cannot maintain the pace of the curriculum or achieve the standards according to the participants. Teachers presented a clear picture of what students need who struggle with the ELA curriculum: more oral language interactions, time, and individualized help.

The Context Determines the Effectiveness of Educational Policies

Teachers agreed that limiting class size and having an interesting curriculum are policies that enhance the oral language development and reading achievement of kindergarten students. They generally felt that prescribed curricula and restrictions on materials and strategies did not promote student achievement. Large classes inhibit teacher student interaction, and thus thwart language development according to participants. Generally, there was agreement amongst the teachers that ELA testing was a hindrance because it was so time consuming.

Conclusion

This project has contributed to the current debate regarding the shift from a developmental to an academic kindergarten by presenting the lived experiences of long term teachers who have taught in both types. It is not enough to talk to experienced kindergarten teachers who have only taught with the standards because they cannot articulate

the unintended consequences these changes have had on students.

Since all participants were from California, future research could focus on perceptions from long term teachers in other states and countries. Additionally, it is possible that the length of the kindergarten day may have accounted for some of the teachers' perceptions. The Public Policy Institute of California (2009) reported that 43% of kindergarten classes are on full day schedule. Finally, more attention must be given to student social and emotional development. Students unready for the rigor of the CCSS, must be prevented from feeling discouraged or becoming unmotivated to learn. As Kohn (2011) pointed out, the CCSS does not address the affective domain of reading and words like intrinsic motivation and developmentally appropriate are missing.

Participants in this study believed that many students are not competent in oral language when they begin kindergarten and thus cannot maintain the pace of the ELA curriculum. When all content area subjects are given their due time, vocabulary and concepts are developed which prepares students for future success in reading and school. Bassok and Latham (2016) stated that there are meaningful ways to engage students in the literacy curriculum and that it does not need to be at odds with play and developmental approaches.

Future questions for research could be: Can challenging literacy concepts be taught developmentally? Does the average kindergarten student possess enough language competence to master the numerous, rigorous reading standards in the CCSS? Do students feel frustration when they cannot meet the ELA standards and does this set the tone for the next 12 years?

Zarina described an ideal kindergarten experience, "Children need lots of fun, exciting activities and materials that grab their attention and imagination while being encouraged to think, compare, recall, and express thoughts while being guided through a process of their oral language. In turn, this whole process affects and colors all the rest of their learning."

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