THE EFFECTS OF INCREASED ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS ON THE 
RETENTION RATE AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRIMARY 
STUDENTS IN URBAN SETTINGS

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Abstract

The purpose of this review of literature is to explore the effects of increased academic expectations on the retention rate and social-emotional development of primary students urban settings. The literature review explored the definition and ramifications of pushed-down curriculum, and included studies on trends in retention rates as well as longitudinal studies on the academic and social effects of retention. Results and conclusions from the studies indicated that while few, if any, lasting benefits result from retention, it is still widely practiced in schools across the globe. Recommendations include a restoration of developmentally appropriate practices and reexamination of retention practices with designation of funds for research-based instructional programs and intervention strategies.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The advent of high-stakes testing and pressure to remain competitive in the Worldwide academic arena have led schools in the United States to place increased academic expectations on students at younger and younger ages. Surveys of elementary teachers and experts in early childhood education indicate that the academic expectations for students in Kindergarten today are much higher, making Kindergarten today more like first grade was in years past (Curwood, 2007; Elkind, 1993, Hatch, 2002; Hyson, 2003; Nel, 2000; Okpala, 2007). With budget cuts, and some state and federal funds being tied to high-stakes testing, pressure is put on teachers to push students to learn more in less time, which in turn leads to teaching practices that are not necessarily developmentally appropriate.

Whereas Kindergarten classes of years past were generally half-day classes, with an emphasis on teaching social and academic skills through developmentally appropriate, child-centered activities, most Kindergarten classes are now full-day programs that require sitting for long periods of time and emphasize primarily memorization of academic material. Students who have difficulty sitting still, or whose brains may not be developmentally ready to learn some of the material may be labeled as having behavior or learning problems, and are often retained. A review of literature will explore the effects of increased academic expectations on the retention rates and the social-emotional development of early primary students in urban settings, as well investigate developmentally appropriate practices related to teaching early primary students.

Statement of the Problem

Some students who enter kindergarten at age five are developmentally ready to
learn to read, write, and do math. However, others are not, and not necessarily due to the fact that they are unable to learn those tasks, but rather that their brains are not developmentally ready to learn and retain the necessary facts. Furthermore, even students who are able to learn and memorize facts may not be learning to their full potential when they are not being taught in developmentally appropriate ways.

The increased focus on academics also takes focus away from other important areas of development in young children. More seatwork means less time for play and creative exploration, and decreases opportunities to practice critical socialization skills. Schools across the nation are foregoing recess time to make more opportunities for academic practice and test preparation. In Kindergarten of years past, social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, and playing cooperatively were proactively and intentionally taught. Time for play was considered an essential part of the day, and the perfect opportunity to teach important pro-social skills. More recently, playtime is considered a luxury or a reward; thus, opportunities for students to learn to interact cooperatively with their peers are much fewer. Children who grow up with a lack of social skills may have difficulties as adults in the workplace, or in future relationships with others. Furthermore, students who are being taught mainly rote facts to improve test scores will not have the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and creativity.

Students who are being asked to do activities that are not developmentally appropriate, and who lack opportunity to play and interact socially may become very frustrated with school. Students who feel frustrated and overwhelmed will not be able to learn to their full potential. If frustration and a negative attitude toward school persist as the child moves through grade levels, it may lead to an increase in dropout levels, or
more students who are ill-equipped to enter college or the workforce. In urban areas where a large percentage of the students are living at or below the poverty level, a self-perpetuating cycle may occur.

Research Question

The purpose of this research paper is to attempt to answer the question, “What are the effects of increased academic expectations on the retention rates and social emotional development of early primary students in urban settings?” Furthermore, the paper will attempt to answer, “What are research-based, developmentally appropriate practices for early primary classrooms?”

Definition of Terms

Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP): “Instructional practices that address the physical, aesthetic, cognitive, emotional and social domains of children and permit them to progress through an integrated curriculum according to their unique learning needs.”

Pushed Down Curriculum: The name given to the idea that preschool and kindergarten classes look more like traditional first grade classes with emphasis on sitting quietly to listen to whole group instruction or filling out worksheets. Also applies to the idea that teachers expect students to know more academic content when they first enter their classrooms (Willis, 1993)
Authentic Assessment: Student work samples such as photographs, videos, performances, drawings or other visual arts and writing tasks that demonstrate “a much clearer picture of student’s knowledge and growth and provide opportunity for creativity and ownership on the part of the learner.” (Rushton, Joula-Rushton, & Larkin, 2010, p. 359)

Social Promotion: “Promoting to the next grade children who have not mastered curriculum content at their current grade” (Wu & West, 2008, p.727).

"At-risk": widely used and can reflect a combination of factors. At-risk children may come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, unstable home environments, exposure to violence, limited access to cognitive and language modeling. It can also include children from minority or ethnically diverse backgrounds as well as children with developmental delays or disabilities (Buford & Stegelin, 2003, p.22).

Redshirting: The definition of a “redshirt” is a child who is age-eligible for kindergarten, but spends an extra year in preschool. It is also sometimes called “the gift of time”. (Datar, 2006; Graue, Kroeger, and Brown, 2003)

Retention: “The practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full year to remain at that level for a subsequent school year” (Anderson, Whipple, & Jameson, 2002)
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Pushed Down Curriculum and “The Hurried Child”*

The current trend across the nation is to require more structured academics at younger ages and grade levels (Curwood, 2007; Elkind, 1993; Hatch, 2002; Hyson, 2003; Janisch, 2003; Okpala, 2007). According to Anne Stoudt, a 19 year veteran kindergarten teacher, “Kindergarten is now first grade, and first grade is now second grade. It used to be normal for first graders to still be learning to read. Now the handful of kindergarteners who aren’t reading by the end of the year are considered to be behind” (Curwood, 2007, p.29). Hatch (2002) called this a “curriculum shovedown” and noted that it can be problematic in many areas including putting undue pressure on children and teachers, promoting performance over learning, and sameness versus diversity.

Elkind (1993) called this pushdown of curriculum “Miseducation”. He stated that, “All across the country, educational programs intended for school-aged children are being appropriated for education of young children,” (p.3). Also noteworthy is the fact that some states such as New York, Connecticut, and Illinois are advocating that students enter school at age four. Furthermore, many kindergartens have become full day, and nursery or preschools have become prep-kindergartens. Elkind also pointed out that the
curriculum in the prep and kindergarten programs are subjects and activities that were once reserved for first-grade children. (p. 3) His concern was that, “When we instruct children in academic subjects, or in swimming, gymnastics, or ballet, at too early an age, we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and long term personality damage for no useful purpose. There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits, and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm” (p. 4).

In response to worries about the “Hurried Child” phenomenon, a research study was designed to follow 100 children over the course of several years to examine whether children were better or worse off after attending preschools that that were more teacher-directed and academic in nature rather than those that were focused on play and child-centered exploration. The results of the study indicated that there were no overall cognitive gains in the students attending more academic preschools. Students from the academic settings may have known more letters and numbers at the beginning of Kindergarten, but overall demonstrated less creative thought and had less positive attitudes toward school than other students (Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991).

When academics are the focus of instruction for young children, the achievements of learning more academic skills can come at the expense of other necessary skills such as self-reliance and problem-solving (Curwood, 2007). Curwood also asserted that young children learn best through play, rather than rote memorization or flashcards. In an academically focused program, there tends to be much less time for play, and more of an emphasis on memorization of skills and facts.

Janisch (2003) also expressed concern for pushing advanced academics on Kindergarten students. Janisch wrote, “Play is an age appropriate modality for children’s
communication, and may provide the only avenue through which some things can be taught (p. 25). However, in most kindergarten and primary programs today, there is less play time, both within the classroom in the form of “free play” time and without in the form of reduced recess time. Kindergarten teachers report that there is not enough time to get in all of the academic requirements if they allow time for play. However, if play is the modality through which children learn best, it is a disservice to them to continue to take more of that time away, as well as counter-productive.

A joint statement of concern was issued by a group of national organizations involved in elementary and early childhood education including the Association for Childhood Education International, Association for Supervision and Curriculum development, International Reading Association, National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Council of Teachers of English. The statement suggested that many pre-first grade children are subjected to rigid formal pre-reading programs with inappropriate expectations and experiences for their level of development. Little attention is given to individual development and learning styles. Furthermore, the pressures of accelerated programs do not allow children to be risk takers as they experiment with language and internalize concepts about how language operates. The organizations felt that too much attention was focused upon isolated skill development or abstract parts of the reading process, rather than upon the integration of oral language, writing, and listening with reading (Elkind, 1993).
The Link to High-Stakes Testing

The current trend in high-stakes testing has had far-reaching effects on the content that is taught in the classroom (Janisch, 2003; Popham, 2001; Rushton, 2010; Sackel, 2006). Sackel (2006) demonstrated that American high stakes testing has been largely modeled after high stakes testing in England. Also, both America and England have a great focus on special education students. However, in the English system, children with disabilities are able to “disapply” from high stakes exams with no consequences for the school. Furthermore, before No Child Left Behind (NCLB) students with disabilities were largely excluded from state testing and accountability systems.

NCLB affects students with disabilities in the following ways:

1. Students with disabilities must be taught the general education curriculum by “highly qualified” teachers using research-based strategies.
2. Students with disabilities are expected to learn challenging academic content
3. They, with very few exceptions, are expected to take and pass the grade level State tests.
4. Additionally, their test scores must be reported and must be counted in school and district ratings. “These four statements of policy are completely incongruous with special education policies such as IDEA and section 504. In short, the special education mantra that ‘All Children Can Learn’ has been changed to ‘All Children Can Learn High Standards.’” (Sackel p. 619)

With pressure on school districts to get the highest possible scores, more and more time is spent focusing on academics with students, both in regular education and special education classrooms. Therefore less time is available for teaching other
important developmental subjects such as explicit, intentional instruction in positive social skills.

**Trends in Early Retention and Retention Rates**

Minimum school entrance ages vary widely across the United States (Datar, 2006; Elkind, 1993; Graue et al. 2003). With increased academic requirements in Kindergarten, many parents and teachers advocate giving children what is sometimes called the “gift of time.” Others may call it “redshirting.” The definition of a “redshirt” is a child who is age-eligible for kindergarten, but spends an extra year in preschool (Graue et al. 2003). Studies have been conducted to test whether “redshirting” or the gift of time is beneficial to students. Datar (2006) found results that suggested, “Older kindergarten entrants have a modest academic advantage over younger entrants in the early grades, which tends to disappear in later grades” (p. 45). Benefits from delaying kindergarten entrance were more prominent for at-risk children.

Graue, Kroeger, and Brown (2003) also sought to study the effects of redshirting. Their study featured a sample size of 14 children in 8 different educational settings. Graue et al. found that teachers involved in the study seemed to have two distinct ideas regarding child development: patterned and episodic versus individualized and adapted to unique needs. Students in classrooms where the teachers displayed heightened attention to developmentally responsive practice (practices that utilized knowledge of typical development and particular knowledge of specific children) tended to be more successful than students in classrooms where lessons were presented in a patterned and episodic way. Overall, Graue et al. demonstrated that, “There is a threshold for acceptable
behavior that includes physical and social maturity, focus, and cognitive structures that allow learning. A younger child is not likely to have all of these attributes, and teachers can see it. Acceptance of developmental variability is limited, with youngness a deficit that is hard to overcome” (p, 6).

Mantzicopoulos (2003) focused on the effect of contextual and individual variables on the retention rate of students after Kindergarten. The study contained 3 cohorts of students from Head Start who attended any of eleven elementary schools in an urban mid-western public school district. A total of 261 students were part of the study, including 132 boys and 129 girls, with an ethnic breakdown of 199 (76.2%) Caucasian, 45(17.2%) African American, 4 (1.5%) Hispanic, 1 (<1%) Asian, and 12 (4.6%) other. The school district in which the study was conducted did not practice Kindergarten retention; rather, students who were deemed not ready for the demands of first grade after a year of Kindergarten were placed in a developmental first grade program. At the end of Kindergarten, 53 of the children were not promoted (NPR). The other 208 students, who were promoted (PR) became the comparison group. Three schools in the district were determined, through a random selection process, to be transition demonstration schools.

Mantzicopoulos (2003) found that the transition classrooms were more developmentally appropriate than the comparison schools, emphasizing cooperation across grade levels, the importance of home-school connection, and increased efforts to meet individual children's varying learning styles, interests, and ability levels. Results also indicated that while child background characteristics such as age, gender, and race were not statistically significant factors for nonpromotion, transition status and parental perceptions of school effectiveness and their child's adjustment were. The probability of
nonpromotion for students in comparison schools was 9% higher, and the risk was 13% higher for students whose families reported lower levels of child school adjustment.

As of 2002, overall retention rates for students at different grade levels had been on the rise for more than 25 years (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002). More recently, and with specific emphasis on early grade retention, there is evidence that “increased academic demands on kindergarten students have resulted in an increased number of students retained in kindergarten” (Okpala, 2007). Wu, West, and Hughes (2008) also noted that high stakes testing and the “accountability movement” likely affect retention rates even when performance on the tests is not the only basis for grade-retention decisions.

Okpala (2007) not only noted the increased trends in retention rates, but also sought to examine teacher perceptions regarding the retention of kindergarten students. Okpala used the sequential-exploratory design method to examine teacher perceptions. Variables included the certification status of the teachers, and number of years of teaching experience as well as the undergraduate major of participating teachers. The results of the study indicated that while all respondents perceived kindergarten retention as “a necessary intervention tool in the larger context of increased accountability and educational reform,” (p. 403) there were variations in the perceptions of long-term benefits of retention. Study participants who were certified had a lower perception of the benefits than those who were non-certified (M = 3.17 SD = 0.71 and M = 4.46 SD = 0.30 respectively). Furthermore, teachers with more than 5 years of teaching tended to have a lower perception of retention benefits than those with less than 5 years of experience (M = 3.44, SD = 0.64 and M = 4.34, SD = 0.47).
Empirical evidence that has been gathered for more than 50 years suggests that grade retention either has no benefit on the retained student, or has a negative impact on achievement and on social and emotional adjustment, self-confidence, and attachment to school (Dennebaum & Kulberg, 1994; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; McCoy & Reynolds; Miesels & Liaw as cited in Wu, West, and Hughes, 2008). Gadeyne, Ongherna, and Ghesquiere (2008) asserted that although research-based evidence demonstrates that early grade retention is not generally beneficial, students are still commonly retained in countries all over the world.

To quantify the effects of grade retention on the long-term mathematics and reading skills of students, Wu, West, and Hughes (2008) utilized a newer form of statistical analysis called propensity score analysis on a group of 784 students drawn from three school districts in Texas (one urban and two small cities). All participants were below the median in literacy at school entrance. All 784 retained students were matched with non-retained students on the basis of propensity scores that were gathered from 72 background variables. Over a four-year period, student achievement scores of the paired students were gathered and analyzed, with the results being mixed and inconclusive. The researchers noted that, “results differ on the basis of the scale used (age or grade), time elapsed since retention year, and achievement domain (reading vs. math)” (p.738) and suggested that more data was needed to present a clearer picture of retention effects on achievement in math and literacy over time.

*The Effects of Retention and Pushed-Down Curriculum on Social Skills*
Retention has been shown to have far reaching effects on the social skills of young children. (Gadeyne, Onghena & Ghesquiere, 2008; Hong & Yu, 2008; Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002) Students who are retained tend to have issues with self-esteem and often feel frustrated. It is difficult for children to thrive and learn if they feel negatively about themselves as learners.

Johnson, Ironsmith, Snow, and Poteat (2000) suggested that although more and more emphasis is being put on academics, all people that are involved in the education of the child including parents, teachers, and administrators need to understand the importance of social skills on the overall performance and long-term success of the student. Johnson et al. focused on the development of social relations in preschool children and how it affected their performance as the children progressed in elementary school. Data was gathered using a sociometric interview to assess a child's peer relationships. Information gathered by interviewing the children and teachers was analyzed to assess the relative social acceptance of children in the classroom. Results indicated that children who were rejected (defined as those who were actively disliked by their peers) or neglected (neither liked nor disliked) were at risk for future problems such as juvenile delinquency, psychological issues, and dropping out of school.

Johnson et al. suggested, "Two essential school supplies that kindergartners need to bring with them on the first day are previous friends who are entering kindergarten with them and strong social skills that assist the child in forming new friendships" (p.209). To that end, "School administrators should attempt to assign children to kindergarten classes so that they have familiar friends with whom to embark on this new adventure. This is not an elaborate or expensive intervention but one that might prove to
be quite effective” (p.212). Furthermore, strategies such as cooperative learning groups to foster social skill development can benefit students. Each child should be part of a "core group" within the classroom environment. The core group should include as much diversity in areas such as ability level, sex, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status as possible. The groups are a way to practice pro-social skills in a small, familiar, non-threatening environment. Students work together on tasks such as taking attendance, collecting papers, group projects, and each child is responsible for contributing to the final product, building a sense of community and belonging.

Furthering the idea of the importance of proactive teaching of social skills and the group dynamics in a classroom environment, Buford and Stegelin (2003) emphasized that it is beneficial for all students, but at-risk students in particular, if the preschool teacher compares the "social blueprint" of her classroom to the social expectations of the kindergarten and first grade classrooms that the children will transition to in order to identify similarities and differences. The more the overlap of skills, the more likely the students will successfully negotiate the transition between programs and have later social success. The implication is that the more closely preschool and kindergarten teachers work to provide a smooth transition, the better the impact on the social skills and readiness of the students. However, with mounting pressures on the preschool teacher to equip students with pre-academic skills, emphasis on teaching social skills may be diminished (Nel, 2000; Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991).
Developmentally appropriate practice refers to the practice of providing a classroom environment that will provide optimal learning experiences for children that are appropriate to the developmental level and interests of each child. With increased pressure to teach more academic content, there is growing concern that schools are not teaching children in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

Rushton, Juola-Rushton, and Larkin (2010) linked developmentally appropriate practice to neuroscience, or the study of brain development. Rushton et al. noted that the human brain has what is sometimes referred to as "plasticity," meaning that the brain is continually changing. Every experience that a child has in the classroom causes a change in the brain. As connections are made, such as when a child begins to associate the shape of a letter to an actual item or experience and to its corresponding sound, new dendrites are formed, and electrical impulses cross thousands of neurons throughout different regions of the brain, which literally changes the wiring of the brain. Therefore, it is extremely important to provide a learning environment for young children that is stimulating and engaging. The learning environment should be "one that is purposely designed to actively engage the minds of young children in order to foster growth. This growth will be strengthening the neurological networks already existing and creating more interconnecting dendrites - the essence of learning - in a young child's brain" (Rushton & Larkin, 2009, p.352).

Careful examination of brain structure further illustrates the importance of a positive learning climate for young learners. Stress causes the Amygdala in the middle brain to send messages to the pituitary and adrenal glands, releasing hormones and neurotransmitters that inhibit the thought processes of children (Rushton,358). Thus,
when children are asked to do tasks that are developmentally inappropriate, and then struggle to do the tasks, the stress starts a chain-reaction that ultimately makes it even more difficult for the learner to absorb and understand the material being taught.

Conversely, breakthrough discoveries in neuroscience can also offer insight into ways to help children learn. The use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has shown that portions of the human brain light up when a person observes someone else performing an action in a strikingly similar way to the person who is actually performing the task. This phenomenon is known as “mirroring” from the aptly named mirror neurons found in the inferior frontal cortex and the superior parietal lobe of the brain (Rushton et al. 2010). Rushton et al. extrapolated fMRI data to predict that a teacher’s overall demeanor and attitude, as well as subtle cues such as body language, greatly impact the learning of students. Children pick up on signals that a teacher sends, and “mirror” those feelings and attitudes. Therefore, it is vital that teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward learning and model caring, compassionate behavior in order for the children to learn to have a positive attitude toward learning and be compassionate people.

Rushton et al. (2010) asserted that, “We can’t insist that important connections in the brain be made, but we can support or hinder children’s dendritic growth with the practices we implement” (p.360) and suggested that there are four major components to creating a learning environment that is optimal for the stimulation of young children's brains. First of all, the actual physical layout of the classroom including furniture, learning centers, and lighting play a role. Next, how the space is utilized to make room for individualized work, small group work, and large group efforts is important.
Furthermore, manipulative and exploratory materials that will stimulate the children's natural curiosity should be provided, along with ample time to explore them. Finally, the educator should be a compassionate, caring role model who demonstrates enthusiasm and a love of learning.

Hyson (2003) argued for middle ground in relation to DAP in what she calls going “Beyond Either/Or.” In other words, rather than choosing between academics or play, teacher-directed instruction or free exploration, a more balanced approach using effective, appropriate early childhood instruction should be utilized within the classroom. Hyson argued that academic content can be effectively integrated into classroom settings as long as several guidelines are observed. Suggested guidelines include selecting important, appropriate academic content, promoting social and emotional competence, building teacher-child-family relationships, and using positive approaches to learning. Furthermore, Hyson emphasized that it is essential to use appropriate instructional strategies and assessment methods with younger learners, which are different than those used for older students.

Play is an essential part of life for young children, and an integral component of DAP. Janisch (2003) wrote, “Many recommendations of early childhood intervention center on the characteristics of emergent literacy. That is, readiness to read in the sense of being able to recognize and understand the alphabetic principal as a prerequisite for reading have been replaced by the idea that redevelopment begins early and in a variety of contexts, including play settings. Early reading development encompasses the understanding of narrative structures and meta-cognitive awareness, qualities that can be promoted through play,” (p.20). As evidence for the findings, Janisch cited a longitudinal
study by Bergen and Mauer which indicated that first grade reading difficulties may be related to a lack of language play in preschool settings, and suggested that testing early to identify the children with lower phonological awareness might be a way to find children who need additional specific opportunities for symbolic play activities in preschool and kindergarten.

Chenfeld (2004) also noted the importance of play in the learning experiences of young children. She had the opportunity to observe children in a program in Columbus Ohio where the teachers were encouraged to “tune into the interests of the children and go with them,” (p. 142). The children were actively encouraged to express their interests and ask questions, and rather than passive seatwork and rote learning, lessons were exclusively designed around child-centered explorations. As a result, one group of four year olds was engaging in activities such as learning names of states and rivers, and using critical thinking and problem-solving skills that were likely to be seen in much older students. However, the learning was all based in play and hands-on, student directed activities.

Nel (2000) also promoted the importance of play experiences for young learners, especially when dealing with early literacy issues. Academics can be taught to young children, but it is important that they be presented in age and developmentally appropriate ways. The classroom should be set up in such a way to provide multiple, varied opportunities for literacy exploration and child-centered learning (Nel, 2000).

Developmentally appropriate practice should dictate instructional methods in all areas of school curriculum. Yoon and Onchwari (2006) focused on DAP in the context of teaching science to young children. Yoon and Onchwari noted that in order to
effectively teach young learners, the teacher must have knowledge about child
development and learning, knowledge of the individual differences in the learning styles
of each student, and knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which the children
live. Armed with knowledge, the classroom teacher is empowered to provide learning
experiences that will allow children to be active learners and use the children’s natural
curiosity and motivation to explore the matter in their environments. Yoon and Onchwari
also recommended the use of the “5 Es Instructional Model”. In the 5 Es instructional
model, which was developed by the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study in 1989,
teachers provide children with chances to explore specific concepts and questions using
an inquiry-based, step-by-step approach. The Es stand for:

1. Engagement: Teachers engage students in questions about objects, organisms, and
events in the environment, and probe background knowledge and conceptions.

2. Exploration: Students plan and conduct investigations to gather evidence and
answer questions.

3. Explanation: Building on students’ explorations and explanations, teachers
formally present labels, concepts, and principles. Students, guided by the
teachers, use new knowledge to construct scientific explanations and answer
initiating questions.

4. Elaboration: Students apply new understandings to new problems

5. Evaluation: Teachers use formative and authentic assessment means to assess
young children’s new knowledge and abilities. (Carin, Bass, and Contant, 2003
as cited in Yoon and Onchwari, 2006)
Buford and Stegelin (2003) focused on the importance of proactively teaching positive social skills, especially for children who are considered “at-risk.” The link between a student’s ability to successfully handle social challenges and expectations in kindergarten and first grade settings is seen as directly related to the student’s ability to be successful academically. Buford and Stegelin recommended that early childhood teachers use "behavior chaining." At the beginning of the year, teachers list, explain and demonstrate specific routines and expectations within the classroom. Individual child dynamics are observed and analyzed, with a social skills task analysis developed for each student. From the analysis, a "behavior chain" is formed by which a series of specific behaviors are identified and then explicitly taught through strategies such as shaping. Furthermore, the "behavior chains" for the students together form a "social blueprint" for not only individual children, but the classroom as a whole. The "social blueprint" can drive the teaching of pro-social skills and classroom routines within the early childhood learning environment.
CHAPTER III: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS RELATIVE TO THE PROBLEM

Research shows that there has been a “push-down” in curriculum over the past years in the educational system in the United States. In essence, higher-level academics are being taught at increasingly younger ages and grade levels (Curwood, 2007; Elkind, 1993; Hatch, 2002; Hyson, 2003; Janisch, 2003; Nel, 2000, Rescorla & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991). Seasoned primary teachers invariably comment that the content they are being required to teach is what was once commonly taught at the next higher grade level, or sometimes even two grade levels above.

The results of the “push-down” have been numerous and far-reaching. One direct result is that the number of grade-level retentions has increased (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002; Okpala, 2007; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008). Many students are simply not developmentally ready to comprehend the increasingly difficult material. If those same students had been in classrooms with the academic requirements of years past, when the material was at a more reasonable and developmentally appropriate level, they would have had more of an opportunity to succeed academically. Instead, many students
become frustrated and develop negative attitudes about school from a young age. Although the vast majority of research indicates that there are little or no benefits to retention, and that, in fact, retention generally has long-term negative effects on the student such as decreased self-esteem and higher drop-out rates, retention is still widely practiced in schools across the United States and in other countries as well (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002; Gadeyne, Onghena, & Ghesquiere, 2008; Hong & Yu, 2008; Mantzicopoulos, 2003, Okpala, 2007; Wu, West, & Hughes). Although there is little data specifically related to retention rates of students in urban settings, since the majority of students that are retained tend to be “at-risk” due to socio-economic, family dynamics, minority status, or language concerns, and there tend to be higher levels of “at-risk” students in urban areas, it is reasonable to conclude that retention rates would be even higher for many schools in urban districts.

Another result of increased early academics is that it takes time away from other developmentally appropriate activities. As teachers and districts look for ways to maximize time to teach more academic content, play or free-choice time and recess is shortened or sometimes taken away altogether. Research indicates that play is an essential part of life and learning for young children, and that best practice dictates that children be given ample opportunities to interact with peers and their environment in a hands-on, unstructured way (Buford & Stegelin, 2003; Chenfield, 2004; Rushton, Joula-Rushton, & Larkin, 2010; O’Neill-Grace, 2005; Yoon & Onchwari, 2006). If play is taken away, children are missing out on important opportunities to learn problem-solving social skills. Again, it can be reasonably extrapolated that loss of interactive
opportunities is especially harmful to student populations in urban areas where large numbers of students are “at-risk”.

CHAPTER IV: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendation:

Helping children achieve their full potential in extremely important. If children become frustrated because they are continually being asked to do tasks that are not developmentally appropriate, academic success is highly unlikely, and they may be “turned off” to learning permanently. Children’s frustration with lack of success may also have long-reaching effects on self-esteem. Or, as stated by Janisch, (2003) “If play is the strongest organizer of behavior and learning for young children, then diminishing that element diminishes the child” (p. 31).

Schools today are feeling pressured by legislation such as “No Child Left Behind” and placing more emphasis teaching to achieve on high-stakes-testing. However, pushing academic concepts on children that are not developmentally ready will likely be counter-productive in the long run. Increased academics at younger grades increases the number of grade retentions and referrals to special education. Increased referrals cause
districts to spend valuable time and resources on testing and placing children that would likely not have needed those services if they were given developmentally appropriate instruction in the first place.

An analysis and synthesis of current and past educational research suggests that the way to help students be successful is not in retention and repetition of the same material that was not mastered the first time, but rather to focus on evidence-based practices to enhance both academic and the social-emotional competencies that are necessary for students to be successful in both school and life. Districts should focus resources on hiring and retaining teachers who are well versed in developmentally appropriate practices for young children in the primary grades. Furthermore, school resources should specifically target intervention strategies such as remedial instruction, cooperative learning, peer-tutoring, and individualized instruction in order to ensure that the needs of young students are being met. Such strategies are especially important in areas where large numbers of students are part of an “at-risk” population.

Areas for Further Research

There is ample data available in literature that supports and authenticates the use of developmentally appropriate practice in terms of enhancing the social-emotional development and overall well-being of children in a classroom setting. There is also evidence to show how DAP can enhance learning across all areas of curriculum. However, what I did not find was substantial hard data comparing progress of students in schools that proactively teach social skills and allow adequate opportunities for social
interactions and hands-on, exploratory approaches to learning with schools that don’t provide such opportunities.

Therefore, I propose that a study should be conducted to further explore the link between developmentally appropriate practices for primary students and student achievement. The study should be conducted in true school settings to demonstrate the difference in social-emotional competencies and academic achievement levels by students in classrooms who use research-based, child-centered, developmentally appropriate practices and those who follow the regular curriculum.

At the beginning of the school year surveys should be sent to primary teachers throughout a large, urban school district where there is not already a social skills curriculum in place. Surveys should extract information about the daily and weekly classroom schedule as well as how much time is spent on each activity. A separate rating scale should be used to evaluate the social competencies of each student in the classroom, as well as gather baseline data on academic levels. Teachers who return the survey and rating scales and agree to participate in the study should be randomly placed into two groups. In the control group, teachers will continue to follow the regular curriculum and make no changes to the daily routine. The other teachers will use a specified block of time in the daily and weekly schedule to teach a social skills curriculum such as “Second Step – A Violence Prevention Curriculum.” Furthermore, teachers will add specified blocks of time in the schedule that will provide additional opportunities for students to practice learned social skills and interact with hands-on learning activities, during which time the teacher will monitor progress, facilitate independent learning, and model appropriate skills.
Results from the study should be analyzed at the end of the school year. Teachers from both groups should repeat the rating scale assessment for each student. The data from both groups should be tabulated and compared to show changes in levels of social competencies and academic skill acquisition. Comparisons should be drawn to see how students in the classrooms that used DAP fared both academically and socially when compared to the students in the more traditional classrooms.

Limitations of the study would include differences in the administration at different schools within a district. Differing levels of supportiveness by local administration in allowing participating teachers to implement goals and parameters of the study could affect results. An additional limitation is the experience levels and flexibility of the teachers in the study, as well as their willingness to change the classroom schedule and be faithful to maintaining those changes. Furthermore, as district boundary lines are typically formed based on proximity to the individual schools, it is probable that some schools in a large district will have a disproportionately large percentage of students that are “at-risk.” Therefore the results may be skewed, as the classroom populations will not be truly random.

Results from the study should be synthesized with previously published information about the importance of developmentally appropriate practices for young students. Information could then be shared with district leaders in an effort to exact changes that are in the best interest of students. Having concrete facts and examples may help administrators, teachers, and parents to make changes, and be ready to defend a position in favor of developmentally appropriate practices if methodology and results of the study are ever questioned.
Summary and Conclusion

“You can’t make children grow faster by pushing them, just as you can’t make flowers grow faster by pulling them” (an anonymous parent, as quoted in Rushton et. al. 2010). To me, this was the most astute and poignant statement I encountered while reviewing the literature regarding pushed-down curriculum and its effects on young learners. School districts need to stop focusing on test scores and rigorous academic standards, and re-evaluate priorities. The real focus of a school should be to help every child who walks through the door reach his or her full potential; to educate and encourage students to be life-long learners as well as productive members of society. Using developmentally appropriate practices for all children paves the way for that goal to become reality.
References:


