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Prep-kindergarten teachers' beliefs : basic skills versus child-centered orientation

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Prep-kindergarten teachers' beliefs : basic skills versus child-centered orientation

Abstract

This research paper is a partial replication of the Stipek and Byler (1997) study, "Early childhood education teachers: Do they practice what they preach?" The study focuses on teachers' beliefs, goals, standardized testing, and parental pressures of early childhood education. Results of this study revealed prep-kindergarten teachers from the state of Iowa believe social skills are the most important goal of their programs. This confirms the literature review of what is developmentally appropriate for early childhood classrooms. Nearly all teachers in this study reported that they believed their programs to be appropriate for young children and that parental pressure regarding a push for more academic work did not seem to be a problem.

PREP-KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' BELIEFS:
BASIC SKILLS VERSUS CHILD-CENTERED ORIENTATION

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

Division of Early Childhood Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

Katie Stundahl

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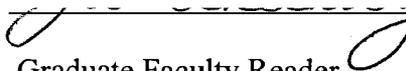
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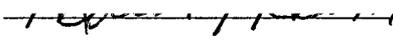
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Graduate Faculty Reader

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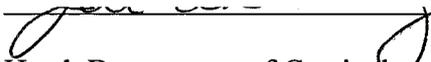
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Introduction

Since Iowa passed the Early Literacy Implementation (ELI) law in 2014, early childhood teachers have felt increasing pressure to have students meet demanding benchmarks. The ELI law was implemented to promote effective evidence-based programming, instruction, and assessments across Iowa schools to ensure proficient readers by the end of third grade (Iowa Department of Education, 2014). The Iowa Code 279.68, otherwise known as ELI, has specific requirements that must be followed by all Iowa school districts before the 2017 school year. The requirements are:

- Provision of universal screening in reading for students in kindergarten through third grade
- Progress monitoring for students who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading
- Provision of intensive instruction- including 90 minutes daily of scientific, research-based reading instruction-for students who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading
- Notice to parents that a student exhibits a substantial deficiency in reading, including strategies the parents can use at home to help the child succeed
- Notice to parents of such a student's subsequent progress
- Provision of an evidence-based summer reading program for students who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading
- Retention of any student who is not proficient in reading by the end of the third grade, did not attend the summer reading program, and does not qualify for a good cause exemption from the retention requirement. (Iowa DOE, 2014, p.1)

Students are to be administered a pre-approved universal screener. The Iowa Department of Education (Iowa DOE) did a systematic review of the assessments that were submitted through a Request for Proposal (RFP) process. A rubric with predetermined criteria was completed for each of the assessments submitted. The assessment with the highest number of points was awarded the contract. The Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST) (Weiss, D., Christ, T. J., & Fast Bridge Learning, 2015) scored the highest and Iowa selected it as the primary screener. Therefore, many schools in Iowa have chosen to use FAST as their universal screener.

The FAST assessment is to be administered three times a year. The first screening should take place within the first six weeks of school, the second within the first six weeks after winter break, and the last screening to be administered during the last four weeks of school (Iowa DOE, 2014, p. 2). If a student falls below the benchmark, the student will need to be monitored weekly to ensure the student's literacy skills are improving. However, a student who falls below the benchmark for two consecutive screenings is termed substantially deficient. The district is then required to provide this student with additional intensive instruction. The intensive instruction is in addition to the already mandatory ninety minutes daily of research-based literacy instruction. Intensive instruction includes:

- Small group instruction
- Reduced teacher-student ratios
- More frequent progress monitoring
- Tutoring or mentoring
- Extended school-day, week, or year

- Summer reading programs. (Iowa DOE, 2014, p.2)

In addition to meeting the requirements of the ELI law, classrooms are required to provide sixty minutes of math per day. These increasing demands are not new to the educational system. In fact, many in education refer to it as the “push-down” effect (Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Bowdon, 2015; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & DeLuca, 2013). This term refers to pushing students to do intensive academic work before they are developmentally ready.

A qualitative study of kindergarten classrooms in Texas examined how teachers tried to find a balance between the demands of state standards and developmentally appropriate practices (Goldstein, 2007). The study found that the teachers were struggling to find ways to implement state-mandated learning standards which intensified their teaching. The teachers expressed that the demands had constrained their use of professional judgment, limited their choices, and restricted the flexibility and freedom to incorporate their own ideas. These increasing demands have raised concerns as teachers try to manage a balance between developmentally appropriate practices and standard curriculum (Pyle & DeLuca, 2013).

There are currently a plethora of studies available on developmentally appropriate practices, early interventions, early literacy, kindergarten standards and push down curriculum (Abu-Jaber, Al-Shawareb, & Gheith, 2010; Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Caulcutt & Paki, 2011; DeLuca & Hughes, 2014; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Gonzalez, 2014; Gullo & Hughes, 2011, Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Marrow, 2004; McMullen, 1999; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Pyle & DeLuca, 2013; Shipley, 2014; Stipek & Byler, 1997).

However, ELI is relatively new and little research is currently available on how to meet the requirements set forth within the law.

Literature Review

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional organization to which early childhood educators look as a reliable source for information. A NAEYC position statement clearly states what is developmentally appropriate practice for early educators:

Developmentally appropriate practice, often shortened to DAP, is an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education. Its framework is designed to promote young children's optimal learning and development. DAP involves teachers meeting young children where they are (by stage of development), both as individuals and as part of a group; and helping each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals. (NAEYC, 2009, p. 1)

A working paper released by the University of Virginia, and written by Bassok and Rorem (2014) suggests that these new mandates and push-down curriculum take time away from activities that are developmentally appropriate. Some studies referred to the NAEYC position statement as curriculum that focuses on the comprehensive development of the entire child, including the social, emotional, language, cognitive, and physical (large and fine motor skills) developmental domains (Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Caulcutt & Paki, 2011; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Gonzalez, 2014; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Marrow, 2004; McMullen, 1999; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Pyle & DeLuca, 2013; Shipley, 2014; Stipek & Byler, 1997). The above researchers state that there are better ways to teach academic content than

large group or teacher-led direct instruction. The academic content of literacy and math should be integrated into all parts of the day, through the use of learning centers, small groups, and free play which are considered the best practice for children to learn said academic skills (Snow & Pizzolongo, 2014). Centers should be interesting, relevant to students in the class, and multi-ability leveled. Small group instruction is a great way to work on targeted skills with a certain set of students and gives ample opportunity for open-ended learning. These studies listed above centered on the beliefs of the teachers that use DAP in their classroom.

Qualitative research, in-depth interviews, and observations were used in a number of studies to investigate how DAP was used in the classroom (Goldstein, 2007; Gonzalez, 2014; Gullo & Hughes, 2010; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Pyle & DeLuca, 2013; Shipley, 2014; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Additional studies used surveys or questionnaires to obtain information from kindergarten teachers about DAP in their classrooms (Abu-Jaber et al. 2011; Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Gallant, 2009; McMullen, 1999). Regardless of the method used to gather the information the results were similar. Teachers reported that they believed DAP is important to a kindergarten classroom. However, there seemed to be consensus that many times other factors prevented or made the teachers adapt the way they actually taught.

A study by Stipek and Byler (1997) sought to find correlations between teacher beliefs on DAP and their actual practices. Teachers were given a three-part survey and were asked to rate the importance of specific objectives for their classrooms, practices that are either teacher-directed or child-directed, and open-ended questions about the field

of early childhood education. These results indicated that the teacher beliefs and practices were aligned.

McMullen (1999) found that many teachers said they believed in DAP, but did not give evidence that the teachers practiced DAP within the classroom. These teachers reported feeling stressed over meeting the demands of outside factors that change the way in which they practiced. For example, pressures from administrators, parents, fellow colleagues with different beliefs, and student performance on standardized tests changed how these teachers taught.

A later study by Gallant (2009) elicited extensive responses from teachers addressing issues of literacy and what challenges to kindergarten teachers to remain developmentally appropriate. Only two out of 229 teachers who responded to the survey commented that most of their students are able to reach the standards and benchmarks and additionally believed them to be appropriate. The other 227 teachers responded with comments that echoed each other stating that the literacy curriculum is developmentally inappropriate. One response read as follows:

I really struggle with developmentally appropriate teaching and the progressive, curriculum-driven expectations of my district and the state! Children are not allowed to be children anymore with such high expectations (What used to be first and second-grade creative writing skills are now expected of kindergarteners). We don't have time for large motor activities, dramatic play, and centers every day, which I believe is necessary at this young age. It's sad that we are accountable to teach the curriculum that is not appropriate for 4 and 5-year-olds. (Gallant, 2009, p. 214)

ShIPLEY (2014) sought to investigate what barriers teachers face when trying to implement literacy into their instruction using DAP. Six teachers were interviewed and all reported that they faced barriers when they implemented DAP within their practices. She also gave examples of what developmentally appropriate literacy instruction practices were used to help ease the gap between these barriers and DAP.

Prep-Kindergarten

The state of Iowa defines kindergarten as programming for children who are kindergarten age eligible and for whom the district receives K-12 student aid (Iowa DOE, 2014). Kindergarten age refers to any child that is five-years-old on or before September 15 of the current school year. The department also acknowledges that some districts offer programs to five-year-old children who are kindergarten age but whose parents decided not to send them to kindergarten. The parents of these children may have chosen not to have their children attend kindergarten for a variety of reasons.

The prep-k program in my school district was designed to provide an extra year of growth between preschool and kindergarten for those students who needed to develop in social and academic skills. The Iowa Department of Education states that the goal of the prep-k program is not to increase the trajectory of learning and therefore students are not to be considered for first grade the following year (Iowa DOE, 2014). Instead these students will be considered retained in an additional year of kindergarten.

Teachers may have also suggested a prep-k program based on the child's readiness screeners for kindergarten. These programs vary from district to district and are known by a variety of names, even though all follow the same standards, such as Prep-Kindergarten (Prep-K), Transitional Kindergarten (TK), Alternative Kindergarten (AK),

Junior Kindergarten (JK), Optional Kindergarten (OK), or Beginning Kindergarten (Beginergarten). Sometimes “redshirted” is a term used to describe students in these programs. For the remainder of this paper prep-kindergarten or prep-k will be used as a reference for all these programs.

Prep-Kindergarten Program Practices

The unwritten policy on how my school district in north central Iowa runs our prep-k program is that a majority of the students qualify for the program because the preschool teachers have deemed they are not ready to meet the demands of kindergarten, whether socially or academically. According to assessments using the Teaching Strategies GOLD (Heroman, Burts, Berke, & Bickart, 2010), parents of other potential students choose to attend the prep-k program due to a late summer birthday and they wanted to wait to send their children so they can graduate at eighteen instead of seventeen. My district has a large English Language Learner (ELL) population and places new students from this group who have no prior schooling in prep-k. This gives the student an extra year to learn English. Because a student is ELL, it does not automatically mean he or she qualifies for prep-k. Many ELL students who attend preschool go directly on to kindergarten. In the past five years the average class size has been twenty students. My program follows the school calendar and students come five days a week for four hours a day. Breakfast is provided to students who choose to take it and lunch is provided to all students. The district provides a separate bus route to take these students home every day at 12:30 pm.

Prior to the signing of Iowa Code 279.68, my program used the Iowa Early Learning Standards (2012) as a guideline. However, since the implementation of Iowa

Code 279.68, the school district has had to make a decision on the type of funding the district administrators wanted for these students. My district's administration has decided to take a type of state funding that required adopting the kindergarten standards for prep-k. Now prep-k students are required to follow kindergarten standards from the Iowa Core (2013). The district's board has chosen FAST as the universal screener and therefore, these students are required to take the FAST assessment. I am currently trying to balance both the Iowa Core and DAP into the prep-k program.

In the 2014-2015 school year, 17 of the 18 students in the program fell below the benchmarks and were labeled as substantially deficient. The 2015-2016 school year winter composite scores revealed that 19 of the 21 students in prep-k fell below the benchmark and were then required to receive intensive instruction.

As a prep-k teacher, I believe in DAP and do my best to follow it in my classroom. In addition to the practices that meet the NAEYC definition of DAP described above, I integrate literacy throughout the day and use thematic instruction to deliver content information that builds on students' prior background. I use my knowledge of child development to plan curriculum. That being said, 90% of my students are falling below the benchmark.

Reoccurring Problem

"Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standardized tests. These practices, which are not grounded in research, violate long established principles of child development and good teaching" (Gullo & Hughes 2011, p. 323). Currently there is little research on how effective state requirements, like the ELI

in Iowa, will be for prep-k classrooms. However, this is a reoccurring problem that continues to baffle the field of education. Dr. David Elkind (2001) is a professor of child development and is a leading world advocate for the protection of childhood. He has published multiple books that explain the importance of play in childhood and how it relates to a school setting. Elkind (1987) explains that this is not the first time education has felt the pressure to be held accountable to state law. In the past, laws have been passed that have caused researchers to seek how teachers handle pressure. These laws include the Nation at Risk (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) movement in the 1980s, Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) in 1994 (Stedman, 1994), and No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001.

Stipek and Byler (1997) sought to learn whether early childhood teachers' views regarding DAP would affirm enrolling students in a prep-k program, especially if they showed social immaturity. The teachers who saw value and relevance in basic skills would be more likely to support the use of standardized tests to determine if a student should attend a prep-k program. The purpose of this current study is to explore whether teachers believe in DAP and use it in the classroom over the demands of standardized tests.

Methodology

Stipek and Byler (1997) used the survey and hours of observation in the classroom as part of their study. The observations were used to assess the actual practices of the teachers. Do they practice what they reported their beliefs to be? I will only use the survey portion of this study, due to lack of funding and time restraints. Therefore, this survey is based on teacher-supplied data and may or may not provide an accurate report of their practices as contrasted with their beliefs.

Participants

The survey was sent to 100 prep-k teachers in the state of Iowa (see the next section for details on the survey). A total of 43 teachers responded to the survey. Teacher respondents reported a range of years taught from 1 to 20 or more. A majority of the teachers (75%) held only a bachelor's degrees; the other 25% held master's degrees. It is unknown if the degrees are in Early Childhood Education or Elementary Education. Of the 43 teachers who completed the survey, 71% have taught other levels of education in addition to currently teaching prep-kindergarten.

Data Collection

The research design is an internet-based survey. An email was sent out to all public school prep-k programs in the state of Iowa. The email included a link to a Qualtrics web-based survey. Teachers were given a two-week window to complete the survey. All participating teachers were asked to complete an anonymous online three-part survey adapted from Stipek and Byler (1997) in its entirety. The first section of this survey is composed of seven goals (see Appendix A). Teachers were asked to rank the

level of importance of each of the goals of their program with a Likert scale, with a five rating meaning “extremely important” and a one rating meaning “not important at all.”

Section two consists of 26 statements to be rated by teachers using a 5-point scale these statements reflect either a basic-skilled orientation (see Appendix B) or a child-centered orientation (Appendix C). The low numbers on the scale mean that the teacher is disagreeing with the statement. As numbers increase in size, this represents more agreement with the statement. A low range score for the basic-skills orientation statements would indicate that the teacher disagrees with those statements and would then be considered child-centered oriented. High range scores for the basic-skilled orientation statements would be evidence that teachers agreed with the statements, therefore are basic-skilled oriented. It would be true for the reverse; that is, a low range score for child-centered statements suggest the teacher disagrees with the statement and would then be considered basic-skills oriented. The high range score for child-centered statements signifies the teacher is child-centered oriented. Basic-skills orientation included statements in which the teachers believe in the effectiveness of formal, highly structured instruction on basic skills (e.g., Children should work silently and independently on seatwork.) The child-centered orientation scale consisted of statements in alignment with NAEYC developmentally appropriate practices, which focuses on children’s self-initiated exploration of concrete objects (e.g., Children learn best through active, self-initiated exploration.).

In the final section of the survey, teachers answered predominantly open-ended questions (see Appendix D) on a range of topics related to early childhood education. First, teachers were asked to rate their programs as about right, or more or less academic

and structured than they believe is appropriate for young children. Then, they were asked to elaborate on their response as to why they believe their program is about right, more or less academic and structured in terms of appropriateness. The second question asked about parental satisfaction with the program. Teachers were asked to describe what changes they think their parents would like to see and what changes they have made on account of parental pressure.

Finally, the teachers were asked about the use of standardized tests. If any standardized tests are given, and if so, which ones and for what purpose. A list of possible purposes were given: (a) to determine acceptance at school, (b) grade placement, (c) class or group placement within grade, (d) diagnostic information, (e) information for planning instruction, or (f) other, and teachers checked any or all that apply. The survey ended with teachers indicating their own views on the usefulness of standardized testing for young children.

Data Analysis

Goals. The seven goals of the survey were ranked by level of importance and listed in the order on how the teachers scored given the responses. The goal with the highest score is listed as most important, the goal with the lowest score is listed as least important for the purpose of this study.

Statements. A value was given to all responses of the 26 statements. Five was given if the response was “strongly agree” and decreased in value to one for “strongly disagree”. Two subscales were created in accordance if the statement was basic-skilled or child-centered orientated. The survey was reviewed and an average score was given to each statement. The higher the average the more the teachers reported agreeing with said

statement. The lower the average the more the teachers reported disagreeing with said statement. An overall average for each subscale was also calculated.

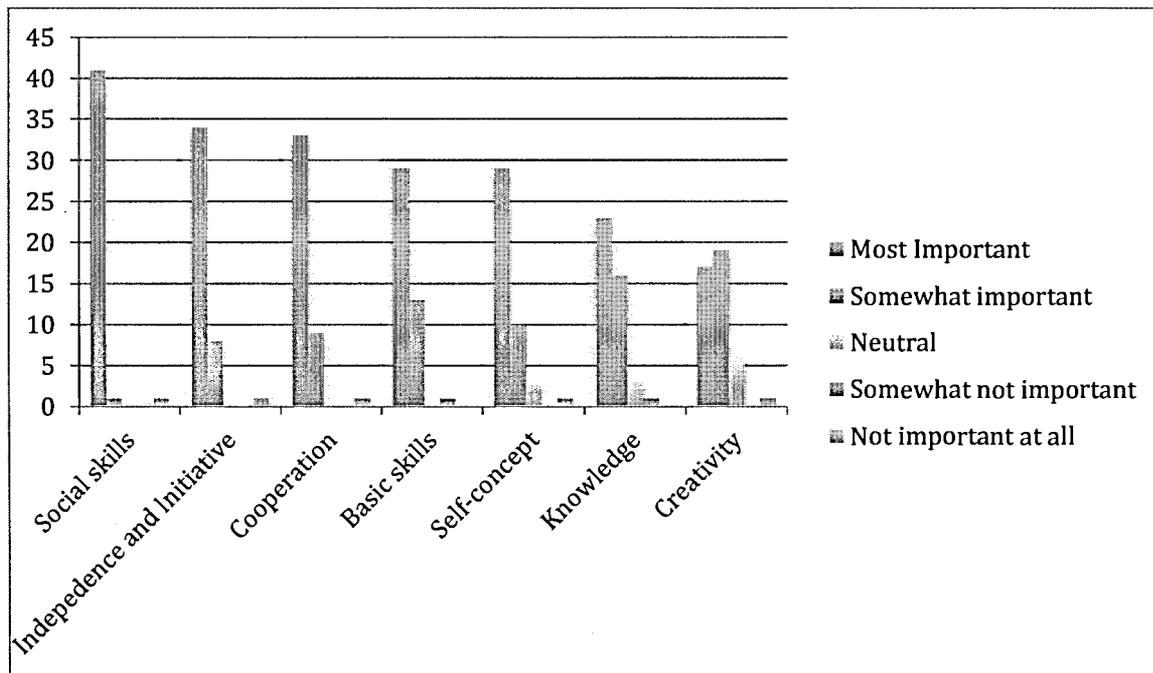
Responses. The open-ended responses from the third section were read. Teacher responses were grouped for each question (ex. more, less, about right). The responses of each group were checked for key words or phrases. For instance, of the teachers that checked “about right”, did these teachers report using a balance of child-centered and basic-skills strategies in their programs?

Results

Program Goals

An overwhelming 95% of teachers reported social skills as the number one goal of their programs. The second most important goal of their programs was independence and initiative (79%). The remaining goals ranked as follows in order of importance: cooperation (77%), basic skills (68%), self-concept (68%), knowledge (53%). Creativity was deemed the lowest with only 39% of teachers reporting it as important. As Table 1 shows, the teachers believe the value of these goals to be important for their programs. Although creativity had the lowest percentage, teachers still believe it is at least somewhat important to their programs.

Table 1 Teachers' Goals for Prep-Kindergarten Programs



Basic Skills versus Child-Centered Orientation Belief Scale

Tables 2 and 3 show the two teacher belief subscales (basic skills and child centered) were averaged to the nearest one hundredth. Given that social skills were deemed the most important goal for such a high percentage of teachers, the averages were surprisingly close. The overall average for both scales are basic skills 3.08 and child-centered 3.44. This indicates that the two scales are closely related and teachers did not believe one subscale to be more important over another. Since the top goals for the programs focus around child-centered strategies and the child-centered scale was slightly higher than the basic-skills scale, one could conclude that beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices are connected to teachers' goals for their programs, although only slightly.

Teachers seemed to respond in favor of most of the statements. The range of averages varied from 2.04 to 4.73. Two statements in the basic skills scale averaged 2.04 indicating that teachers disagreed with those two statements. The first statement read, "Worksheets and workbooks are a good way for children to master academic skills such as math and reading." The other statement is number eight and read as follows, "Child should work silently and independently on seatwork." These two statements go hand in hand and the literature review on DAP above would agree that these practices are developmentally inappropriate for children of this age. "Having children experiment with writing through drawing, scribbling or inventing their own spelling is a good way for children to develop literacy skills" is the statement with the highest average. Teachers endorsed this statement with the most positivity, as all responses for this statement were

recorded as “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree”. No teacher was neutral or disagreed with this statement.

Tables 2 and 3 below list the statement and the average response for that statement. Statements with a high average convey that teachers reported agreeing with said statement. The lower the average the more teachers disagreed with said statement.

Table 2. Subscale 1- Basic Skilled Orientation

Statement	Average
Children who begin formal reading and math instruction in preschool will do better, academically, in elementary school	4.02
It is important for preschool children to become good at counting and recognizing numbers	3.86
Children learn basic skills best through repetition and review	3.81
Practicing letters and their sounds is the best way for children to learn to read	3.74
School work should not be graded in the early elementary grades	3.59
Preschool teachers should make sure their students know the alphabet before they start kindergarten	3.57
Basic skills should be the teacher's top priority	3.38
Children should be given formal instruction in number skills, even if they show little interest in them	3.3
Teachers should not emphasize right and wrong answers	2.93

Teachers should emphasize the importance of quality in final products	2.76
Giving rewards and extra privileges for good performance is one of the most effective ways to motivate children to learn	2.55
If a child is not doing well in kindergarten, time should be set aside every day after school to practice school work	2.42
Formal instruction in math and reading related skills should only be given if children want it	2.12
Worksheets and workbooks are a good way for children to master academic skills such as math and reading	2.04
Child should work silently and independently on seatwork	2.04

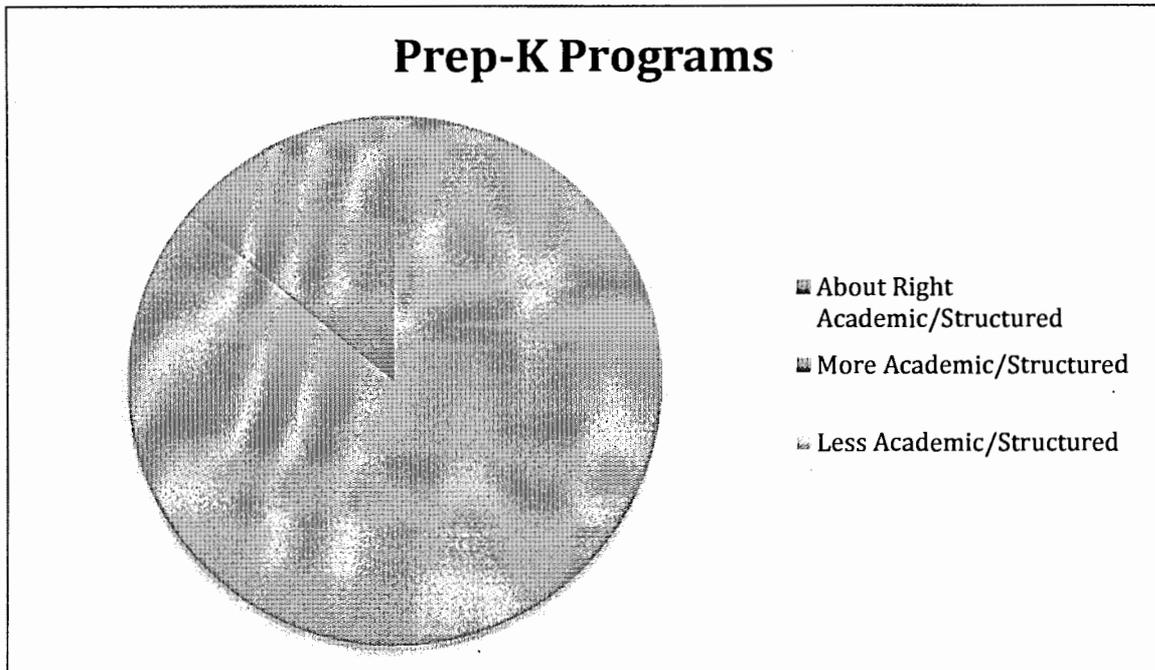
Table 3. Subscale 2- Child-Centered Orientation

Statement	Average
Having children experiment with writing through drawing, scribbling or inventing their own spelling is a good way for children to develop literacy skills	4.73
Young children learn math best through manipulating concrete objects	4.59
Children learn best through active, self-initiated exploration	4.35
The enthusiasm and interest children have in a task is more important than how well they can do it	3.97
Homework should not be given in kindergarten	3.62

Curricular areas should not be taught as separate subjects at separate times	3.30
Even four- and five-year-old children should be told whether their work is correct or incorrect	3.11
Teachers should not permit a child to leave an activity or task before finishing it	2.97
During the time a teacher is presenting a lesson children should not be allowed to interrupt or to relate personal experiences	2.59
Teachers should allow children to opt out of activities	2.48
It is important for children to follow exactly the teacher's plan of activities	2.16

Teachers' Beliefs about their Own Programs

None of the teachers reported that they believed their programs to be less academic and structured than developmentally appropriate. However, more than three-quarters of the respondents (86%) believed their programs are "about right" in terms of academics and being structured appropriately for young children. This analysis of teachers' beliefs about their own programs is compatible with the outcomes of the table above. Since the scales for both basic-skills and child-centered were only slightly different, the data would suggest that teachers believe that what they currently report as "about right" is developmentally appropriate. Many of the responses were very similar stressing the importance of social skills and hands-on activities. One-teacher stated, "We have a spiraling curriculum that is very hands-on and values process over product. We highly value social skills and nurturing independence."

Table 4. Developmentally Appropriate Prep-K Programs

Only 14% of teachers' believed their programs to be more academic and structured than appropriate for children of this age group. Those that believed their programs to be "more" academic had longer more passionate responses than those that believed their programs to be "about right."

"Even tough [*sic*] we are a transitional kindergarten classroom we are required to follow the Kindergarten Core. I feel that the rigor of the core is much to [*sic*] academically based for the children in my classroom. They are in TK because they are not ready for the demands of a typical kindergarten classroom."

Parental Pressures

Almost two-thirds of the teachers (64%) reported that they have not made changes to their programs due to parental pressure. Many of those teachers declared that their parents are pleased with their current programs or simply have not expressed any parental pressures at this time. The other 36% report making minor changes such as adding a classroom website, weekly newsletters, and ideas for things to do at home. One teacher did state:

“We have added a few table time activities with paper and pencil toward the end of the year. This was done after parents expressed concerns that their children “hated school” for the first few weeks of kindergarten and did not want to go. We do these activities more in preparation for the more rigorous “seat work” they will be expected to do in kindergarten.”

Standardized Tests

All teachers reported using some form of standardized test within their programs. FAST was listed as the number one standardized test used in the prep-k programs. Six teachers listed these additional screeners: Star test (Renaissance Learning, Inc., 1986), BOEHM (2001), Boulder Math Screener (Woodward, 2009), a-reading and a-math (Weiss, D., Christ, T. J., & Fast Bridge Learning., 2015) that are used in accordance with FAST. The most-selected (62%) purpose of the test was to be used for diagnostic information. Nearly half of teachers (48%) reported using the test as information for planning instruction. Along with what test is given, participants were asked how useful they believed standardized tests are for young children. Two-thirds (67%) of the teachers wrote they do not find standardized tests useful and 13 of those teachers also reported the

tests to be stressful and unnecessary. Another 26% responded that they find standardized tests slightly useful for special education placement or to guide interventions for those who need extra support. The last 7% claimed to be neutral or did not have an opinion either way on the matter.

Discussion

Comparing Findings: Then and Now

How do these findings above compare to Stipek and Byler (1997) from twenty years ago? First, the original study included 60 preschool, kindergarten, and first grade teachers. The participants were given the exact survey as described above and in addition, the researchers spent an average of two and a half hours of observation in each participant's classroom to assess the teacher's actual practices.

Goals

In the Stipek and Byler (1997) study, kindergarten and first grade teachers who listed social skills as the most important goal also supported child-centered practices. In the current study of just prep-kindergarten teachers, social skills were rated as most important. For preschool teachers independence and self-concept were the most important goals in the Stipek and Byler (1997) study. Independence and initiative for the current study were the second most important goal. For the last 20 years social skills and independence have been and are still considered the most important goals of early childhood programs.

Belief Subscales

Stipek and Byler (1997) found that the two belief scales were negatively associated with each other. The more teachers agreed with basic-skills, the less they supported child-centered practices. Observations from the classrooms were significantly consistent with how the teachers responded to the survey. Teachers who reported they believed in child-centered practices were observed demonstrating those practices in the classroom.

The current study did not use observation as a means to compare whether teachers practiced what they reported and did not show a notable difference between the two belief scales. In the current study all responses were near a three rating, meaning teachers did not really report believing one approach over the other.

The results are not clear as to why current teachers believed that both scales are appropriate for a prep-k program when the original study was negatively associated. Perhaps teachers today do not have an explicit understanding of what DAP is and how it would or should look in a classroom. Since I did not ask teachers to specify the type of degree they have, it is unclear how many of the current teachers hold an endorsement or degree pertaining to early childhood. If the participants have an elementary education degree and not an early childhood degree, that could explain why there was not a substantial difference between the two scales. Teachers who are trained in early childhood tend to believe in child-centered practices; whereas elementary teachers are trained in more of the basic-skills practices.

Another reason may be that teachers want to believe that what they are teaching is appropriate regardless of what research tells us. This is why the hours of observation would be beneficial to clarify if what the teachers self-report is really what they practice.

It is unclear why there are more basic skills statements over child-centered ones. In the Stipek and Byler (1997) study and this replication, all the basic skills statements are listed first. This may have created a bias for or against these statements. Perhaps if all the basic skills and child-centered statements were presented in a random sequence it could prevent any potential bias altogether.

Program Beliefs

This current study had similar results to the Stipek and Byler (1997) study as 68% of the participants believed their program to be “about right.” However, nearly all of their teachers reported they would prefer to have a less academic and structured program. In the current results 86% believe their programs are “about right,” and many (42%) also reported they would prefer to have less academics within their programs.

I do find it peculiar that a high number of teachers reported that their programs are “about right,” yet they comment that they would prefer less academics. It could be that the phrase “about right” is not specific enough. What one teacher believed to be “about right” will not necessarily be what another believed. A teacher may have thought that about right meant most of the program is developmentally appropriate but he or she would make minor changes within his or her control to reflect more of his or her beliefs. Others may have thought that some of the components of their programs are about right but due to pressures or mandates they think minor changes need to be made that are out of their control.

Parent Pressures

Teachers 20 years ago reported having more parent pressures regarding implementing more basic skills. They listed more homework, academics, tutoring, and weekly spelling tests as parent pressures.

The majority of the current participants reported their parents were satisfied with the programs offered and that no changes have been made due to parental pressure. This could explain why there is no parental pressure now because the teachers of 20 years ago may have made changes and inadvertently changed the way prep-k programs run. This

could also explain why the two scales were so closely related. Teachers believe what they are doing is appropriate because parents and administrators are happier since the changes were made.

Standardized Tests

More teachers (78%) from the Stipek and Byler (1997) study compared to the current study of (67%) thought standardized tests were not useful. Like those from the current study, the Stipek and Byler teachers who did find standardized tests useful noted the tests were helpful in planning individualized instruction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After comparing the results from my study to those from Stipek and Byler (1997), it is evident that we are still debating over what is developmentally appropriate for early childhood and how to implement it in our classrooms. As reviewed in the literature above, child-centered practices are described as developmentally appropriate. Seeing social skills ranked so highly among the teacher responses of the current study for their programs could lead one to believe that a child-centered orientation would have a significantly higher average. Teachers' beliefs from 20 years ago gravitated towards basic skills or child-centered orientation more consistently. The beliefs of today's teachers suggest that they are wavering between child-centered and basic-skills as indicated in Table 3 above.

Because the sample of teachers was small and limited to only prep-kindergarten teachers, these findings should be interpreted cautiously. Teachers may have had different learning standards in mind when answering and some statements could appear to be conflicting. For example, "Practicing letters and their sounds is the best way for children to learn to read" (on basic-skills orientation belief scale). In the current study, if teachers were thinking that children singing silly songs, rhyming their own and friends' names, or connecting a written M with a beginning sound are self-initiated explorations, then they might have agreed with the statement. Others may have been thinking about flashcards with "drill and kill practices" and also agreed with the statement.

The data from this survey could be used in a follow-up study at a later date to compare what teachers say they believe with what they report. Observations could be done in willing participants' classrooms generated from these responses. Do they actually

practice child-centered orientation or are they more skill based than they realize? This data could also be used in comparisons with similar data from other parts of the country. How do teachers in the Midwest compare with teachers on the coasts or in the South?

Although the data does not show a difference between teachers who believe in child-centered orientation or basic-skills, this study could be used to help the state set better parameters for how a prep-k program should operate. The guidelines for current prep-k programs are vary vague and each district is required to determine how the program should be run. I believe the state needs to put together a task force of current prep-k teachers and representation from the different educator preparation colleges that research best practices and set better guidelines for all these programs.

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Appendix A**Goals for Prep-Kindergarten Programs**

1. Social skills
2. Independence and initiative
3. Basic skills
4. Cooperation
5. Knowledge
6. Self-concept
7. Creativity

Appendix B

Basic skills Orientation Belief Scale Items

1. Children who begin formal reading and math instruction in preschool will do better, academically, in elementary school
2. Worksheets and workbooks are a good way for children to master academic skills such as math and reading
3. Preschool teachers should make sure their students know the alphabet before they start kindergarten
4. Basic skills should be the teacher's top priority
5. Children learn basic skills best through repetition and review
6. Practicing letters and their sounds is the best way for children to learn to read
7. Children should be given formal instruction in number skills, even if they show little interest in them
8. Child should work silently and independently on seatwork
9. Teachers should emphasize the importance of quality in final products
10. If a child is not doing well in kindergarten, time should be set aside every day after school to practice school work
11. It is important for preschool children to become good at counting and recognizing numbers
12. Giving rewards and extra privileges for good performance is one of the most effective ways to motivate children to learn
13. Formal instruction in math and reading related skills should only be given if children want it

14. School work should not be graded in the early elementary grades
15. Teachers should not emphasize right and wrong answers

Appendix C

Child-Centered orientation Belief Scale Items

16. Teachers should allow children to opt out of activities
17. Children learn best through active, self-initiated exploration
18. Curricular areas should not be taught as separate subjects a separate times
19. Having children experiment with writing through drawing, scribbling or inventing their own spelling is a good way for children to develop literacy skills
20. Homework should not be given in kindergarten
21. Young children learn math best through manipulating concrete objects
22. Teachers should not permit a child to leave an activity or task before finishing it
23. The enthusiasm and interest children have in a task is more important then how will they can do it.
24. It is important for children to follow exactly the teacher's plan of activities.
25. Even four- and five-year-olds children should be told whether their work is correct or incorrect.
26. During the time a teacher is presenting a lesson children should not be allowed to interrupt or to relate personal experiences

Appendix D

Open-Ended Questions

1. Do you believe your program is about right, more, or less academic and structured than you believe is appropriate for young children.
2. What changes do you think your parents would like to see and what changes have you made on account of parental pressure?
3. What is your belief about school readiness and prep-K programs?
4. Which standardized tests are used in your program?
5. What is the purpose of the standardized test used?
6. What is your opinion on the usefulness of standardized tests for young children?