

Journal of Family Strengths

Volume 18

Issue 1 *Critical Issues: Defining and Debunking
Misconceptions in Health, Education, Criminal Justice,
and Social Work/Social Services*

Article 10

10-23-2018

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Recommended Citation

Keskin, Burhanettin (2018) "The Myth of the Well-Known 'Solution' of Push-Down Academics," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol18/iss1/10>

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The Myth of the Well-Known “Solution” of Push-Down Academics

There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible and wrong.

– Henry Louis Mencken (1920)

The Birth of a Myth

The successful launch of the world’s first artificial Earth satellite in 1957 by Russian scientists had a dramatic effect on the American education system. Many Americans feared that the education system in the United States was not as effective as those of its rivals. Their fear originated from the notion that if the United States had had a better education system, it would have been the United States launching a satellite, not Russia. The fear quickly manifested itself as an effort to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic at the nursery and kindergarten levels (Read, Gardner, & Mahler, 1993). The attitude that made a scapegoat of early childhood education as responsible for the perceived failure of the United States became even more prevalent as decades past.

In 1965, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted. The act aimed to diminish educational achievement gaps through high-quality education based on fairness (ESEA, 1965). During the late 1970s and 1980s, as states implemented more pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs, the early childhood education curriculum started to replace formal subject- and skill-based academic instruction with rote learning, memorization, whole-class instruction, and skill/drill practices. Because young children were subjected to academic expectations appropriate for older children, these practices came to be called “push-down” academics. Kindergartens started to look more like first-grade classes and pre-kindergartens started to look like kindergartens (Puckett & Diffily, 2004). Of course, these were not simply changes in look and design but also changes in instructional practices and what was expected of the children.

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report called *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR). This report was an attempt to address accumulating dissatisfaction with the education system as its critics noted the declining educational status of the United States compared with other developed countries. It stated, “We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments” (ANAR, 1983). This report added to the fear of falling behind other nations.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Its aim was “to improve learning and teaching by providing a national framework for education reform; to promote the research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement for all students; to provide a framework for

reauthorization of all Federal education programs; to promote the development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards and certifications; and for other purposes” (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994).

About two decades after the ANAR report, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB Act) was signed into law by President George W. Bush (NCLB, 2002). This act had a significant effect on early childhood education because it relied heavily on accountability and standardized testing. With the NCLB Act, even more stringent academic expectations were imposed on children that were not designed with developmentally appropriate practices in mind. The overall idea of "push-down" academics—that children should master more academics at an early age—is very much the manifestation of a business-like approach to education.

In 2012, President Barack Obama launched a Race to the Top (R2T) competition at the school district level. This program provided funding for schools to implement ambitious educational reforms. Race to the Top asks states to make reforms in the following specific areas:

Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy; building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction; recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and turning around our lowest-achieving schools. (Race to the Top, 2012)

The fear of losing power in the world, coupled with the seemingly innocent and commonsense idea that children should master more academics at an earlier age, made the push-down academic approach to early childhood education popular. Thus, a very compelling myth was born: It is not only better but also crucial for children learn more academics as early as possible (there is no such thing as too young to learn academics), and childhood is not about being a child but a preparation stage for the business world.

Another reason for the popularity of this myth is the “availability heuristic,” which refers to a mental shortcut resulting in a simple solution to a complex issue, generating useful outcomes as well as serious mistakes (Dodge, 2009; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). It is easier to come up with a simple solution to a complex educational problem, such as the idea of introducing academics to young children as early as possible and measuring their learning with standardized testing, than it is to address the issue within a comprehensive framework (e.g., addressing poverty). Rather than expecting the average person to make sense of a multilayered, convoluted education issue, heuristic comes to the rescue with a simplified answer to end the confusion. Reducing a complex education issue to an understandable number, obtained through standardized tests, makes this act appear valid and professional, yet it reduces classrooms into joyless test preparation workshops (Dodge, 2009).

Why Is the Myth Wrong?

What could be wrong with approaching early childhood education in a business-like manner in a country where business is the focal point? It seems only reasonable to do so. This approach disregards developmentally appropriate practices (DAPs)—those that “result from the process of professionals making decisions about the well-being and education of children based on at least three important kinds of information or knowledge: what is known about child development and learning ...; what is known about the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child in the group ...; and knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, pp. 8–9). These three “important kinds of information or knowledge” are largely ignored in a push-down academic culture, which comes with high-stakes testing. Standardized tests alone cannot reveal information about the strengths, interests, and needs of individual children, their social and cultural contexts, their creativity, how they can explain a phenomenon, debate about it, and so on.

Dr. Ashlesha Datar conducted a study to compare the academic performance of children entering kindergarten on time versus the performance of those whose parents delayed their entry for a year; the study analyzed nationally representative data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K), which surveyed a cohort of children from about a thousand kindergarten programs in the United States. The results clearly showed that the academic performance of the children who entered kindergarten a year later was significantly better (Datar, 2006). This means that pushing more academics onto children who are too young to make sense of academics does not really help the children. When children are given time to mature sufficiently to process academics, they perform better.

Another danger of push-down academics is that when academics are pushed down on children at a younger age, more time is devoted to academics and less time to the arts and other subjects that are not assessed. Bassok, Latham, and Rorem (2016) compared public school kindergarten classrooms in 1998 and in 2010 by using two large, nationally representative data sets from kindergarten cohorts of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K:1998 and ECLS-K:2011). The study found that “kindergarten teachers in the later period held far higher academic expectations for children both prior to kindergarten entry and during the kindergarten year. They devoted more time to advanced literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction, and assessment and substantially less time to art, music, science, and child-selected activities” (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016, p. 1). This attitude turns prekindergarten into kindergarten, kindergarten into first grade, and so on. Dr. Marcy Guddemi (2013), former executive director of the Gesell Institute, states the following:

Gesell found that all children go on the same path of development; however, some go faster, some go slower, and all have spurts and set-backs along the way. The obvious example is the age that children learn to walk. Some children learn to walk as early as nine months, some as late as 15 months. But that is all normal and we all

agree that the early walker is not a better walker than the later walker. A similar example is the age that children learn to read. Some children learn to read at age three or four years, others not until seven years or later. That range is quite normal. The most compelling part of the reading research is that by the end of third grade, early readers have no advantage over later readers. Some later readers even go on to become the top in their class. Reading early is not an indicator of higher intelligence. In fact, children at the top of their class in kindergarten only have a 40 percent chance of being at the top of their class at the end of third grade. (Guddemi, 2013)

Guddemi also points out the results of a nationwide study conducted by the Gesell Institute of Child Development, which revealed that children develop at about the same rate with similar variations and reach the developmental milestones at about the same time just as they did about a century ago, when Arnold Gesell started collecting data on children (Guddemi, 2013). Then, what is the developmental (and logical) basis for imposing more academics on children at an ever-younger age?

Rebecca A. Marcon (2002) conducted a longitudinal study to compare the later successes of children with more academic preschool experiences versus the later successes of those with child-initiated experiences by sampling a large number of schools and teachers. The results showed that children with academically oriented preschool experiences received significantly lower grades than did children with child-initiated preschool experiences. Dr. Marcon explained this finding by stating that children's later school success seemed to be heightened by child-initiated, active preschool experiences but undermined by the academically oriented preschool experiences that children were exposed to too soon without regard for their developmental status.

Even if push-down academics increase children test scores, this does not mean that such approach to education results in learning. It is important to make a distinction between training and learning, as Laura Pappano (2010) does. Push-down academics may train children to be good at test taking, but this does not mean that learning automatically has occurred.

Social Implications

One of the social implications of push-down academics is children's attitude toward school and learning. When children are exposed to an academic curriculum that they are not ready for, they struggle. This may lead to a negative attitude toward school. Pushing more and more academics onto children means most school time is devoted to drill and memorization, with less time left for play and enjoyable educational activities (projects, explorations, discussions, debates, inquiries, etc.). Negative impressions about school and learning acquired at an early age are hard to change and can be detrimental not only to a student's academic life but also to his or her daily life. It is not hard to imagine a child's negative image of school/learning increasing as the years pass, eventually causing the child to drop out of school. Taking the fun out of learning has a long-lasting effect. When a person associates school/learning with drill, memorization, and stressful testing,

that person's tendency to learn throughout life suffers dramatically. Imagine a generation that finds no joy in learning. This is a disastrous scenario for any society. Individual distaste for school/learning soon enough becomes public mistrust of the educational system entirely. Individuals who go through more than a decade-long school journey while being trained to think that there is only one answer to a problem and all one has to do to is choose the one correct answer among four options do not constitute an ideal workforce for any industry. In real life, creative thinkers are more in demand than people who are trained not to think outside the box. The more students are trained not to think critically and creatively, the less possibility there is for today's economy to find the workforce necessary to maintain its status.

When a stage in life is valued only for what will come out of it, rather than for its own sake, life becomes a joyless and endless preparation process for what is to come next. When you reach your destination you realize that you have not enjoyed the stage you just left behind, and all you do is prepare for what will come next. Any unfulfilled stage in life not only is lost time but also leaves one with a never-ending yearning. It is very difficult for generations that did not live their childhood fully to form a healthy society.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement brings to our attention another harmful effect of push-down academics. Introducing academics to ever-younger children exacerbates the teacher shortage because as what is expected of teachers increases, the incentives for teachers to enter and remain in the profession do not (NAEYC, 2003). This situation makes the teaching profession appear undesirable.

The myth of push-down academics ignores one of the main issues involving the education of young children—poverty. Because push-down academics come with standardized testing, and thus with a one-size fit all mentality, as Dianis, Jackson, and Noguera (2015, p. 37) state, “Students cannot be tested out of poverty.” The issue of poverty is too deep to be solved with more testing. At the end, push-down academics not only ignore one of the main issues but also distract the public's attention from the issue. It is good to keep in mind that ultimately, the success of schools is not really measured by the academics they have taught or the high test scores of their graduates but by the astonishing lives of their graduates (Jorgenson, 2012) and their contribution to society. Imagine a society in which the joy of reading and learning is lost and interest in art and humanities is in decline because they are not worthy (“testy” enough) to be taught in schools anymore. This is the ultimate social implication of push-down academics. Is this the type of society we want to create and live in?

Legal Implications

The promise of the school is to teach and facilitate learning. Imagine going through many years of schooling and ending up learning very little because of excessive time spent on teaching for the test. If the time spent in school is used for what Olaf Jorgenson (2012) calls “sit, get, spit, forget” practices, then the school is not delivering what it is supposed to deliver. This could be a legal issue. When a

person purchases a product and finds out that the product is not working as the producer promised, one expects a refund, exchange, or compensation. If the producer refuses to issue any of these, a legal case can be brought against the producer. A similar case could involve the schools. We know that “sit, get, spit, forget” is not a model for learning. However, if the schools are not delivering real-life learning experiences, then they could be held liable in accordance with the law.

Because push-down academics cannot be separated from high-stakes testing, its victims are mainly members of minorities and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is well-known that parents’ income level is strongly correlated with their children’s test scores. Usually, the higher the family income, the higher the test scores of the children. A legal case could be brought stating that these practices target minorities along with other persons of low socioeconomic status and endanger their educational opportunities.

Ethical Implications

Push-down academics first and foremost are a human rights issue. It is our ethical responsibility to make sure that our children are exposed to developmentally appropriate practices, not to “sit, get, spit, forget” practices. Meaningless, ineffective, temporary training practices steal our children’s childhood by not allowing them to do what children are supposed to do—play and learn in an enjoyable manner. Pushing children into more academics at an earlier age is like pushing people to eat when they are not hungry. Most people find it painful (and harmful) to eat when not hungry. The same is true intellectually. When we are not intellectually ready for certain information, and we are forced to learn it, first of all we do not enjoy the process; second, it may take longer to understand the information, and third, retention may not be permanent compared with retention of a piece of knowledge that we are eager to learn.

Meaningless training for a test rather than learning turns children away from schooling and learning. They start associating schools with boring test preparation that has no or little relevance to life, not with learning meaningful information that will advance a person’s life. The people behind push-down academics carry the ethical burden of being the main cause of children’s losing interest in learning. Many young children are subjected to stress that they cannot handle at a young age. They develop test anxiety, and their psychological well-being is put at risk. Fearing to lose their jobs because of students’ poor performance on tests, administrators are pushed to falsify test records. We as a society must ask, “Is it ethically acceptable to subject children, teachers, administrators, and parents to great stress because of high-stakes testing?”

Another ethical issue with push-down academics is that they divert our attention from the main cause of the achievement gap, which is poverty, and cause us to blame teachers, administrators, and parents. Instead of fighting poverty, a soft target is under attack as a misleading act. Piaget warned that teaching young children complex tasks is equivalent to training a bear how to ride a bicycle. Such complex tasks can hinder the normal development of children and therefore can be harmful. Certainly it is fun to watch a bear riding a bicycle, but we must ask ourselves how useful is it for a bear to learn how to ride a bicycle? In the real world,

how relevant is it for a bear to know how to ride a bicycle? How useful is it for a child to solve a problem in an artificial situation may never be experienced in real life—choosing a correct answer presented along with false answers? It surely is fun to see a child locating the correct answer on a test, but how relevant are such artificial questions to a child's daily life? Is it not ethically wrong to waste the precious time of childhood on such meaningless practices rather than to focus on teaching and letting children discover meaningful information that they can use in their lives?

How Can We Address the Push-Down Academics Myth?

Having an open and continuous dialogue with teachers, administrators, and representatives could be helpful in ensuring that children have enough time for free play, recess, and meaningful learning opportunities. Take a look at the following real-life story:

While picking up his child from school, a father notices that his son is very upset. He asks what happened that made him unhappy. The boy says with watery eyes that he got an F in his favorite subject, math, and he has no idea why. When they arrive home, the father examines the text. There are several questions about how to calculate the area of a rectangle (by using the number of columns and rows). The father notices that his child calculated the area by consistently multiplying the number of columns by the number of rows. His answers are right. When the father contacts the teacher about this, hoping that this mistake can be addressed easily, the teacher insists that the way the child solved the problem is not correct even though he found the correct answer. The teacher says that he found the area by multiplying the number of columns by number of rows, instead of multiplying the number of rows by number of columns—the way the teacher taught. The child knows that in multiplication it does not matter which number comes first. However, the teacher and the administrator say we want children to solve the problems the way they are shown by their teachers because the state tests require them to solve each problem in a certain way. After a lengthy debate about teaching for the test and allowing students to solve the problems in their own way as long as no math rules are violated, the school agrees to change the child's grade. Receiving the grade he deserved does not help the child feel any better as he becomes less confident in his math abilities and more prone to following the rules even if they do not make sense at all.

The above scenario shows that teaching for the test and not accepting creative ways to solve problems undermines children's self-confidence and their creativity.

Let's take a look at another real-life scenario to see how push-down academics affect young children:

A third grader tells her parents that she passed the state math test and the teacher and the principal said she could go to the back of the school with

those of her peers who also passed the math test to celebrate with inflatable bouncers, while the students who did not make the desired score on the test stay in classroom as a consequence. The child tells her parents that she is happy about passing the test but is upset that some of her friends could not join her for the fun activity. The parents contact the principal and the teacher, expressing their concern about this punitive practice that creates a division and stigma in their child's class. The principal insists that it is not a punishment, just a consequence.

Now imagine how you would feel as a third grader who did not make the desired score. You might feel as if you were a failure, and now it is official. Who has the right to make a third grader feel this way? Push-down academics are not as innocent as they look. When a child's self-confidence is undermined by the school authorities, it is not easy to repair it. The feeling of failure may linger for a long time for a young child. Push-down academics come with big baggage of humiliation, rewards, punishment, pressure, fulfilling someone else's goals rather than one's own, doing things for the sake of satisfying authority figures rather than doing what one feels is the right thing to do (i.e., learning math to receive a reward rather than learning math for the fun of it and for its usefulness in life or reading for the sake of receiving points rather than reading for enjoyment and authentic learning) and with a lot of stress. Crucial experiences such as free play, nap, recess, dramatization, reading aloud, music, and art are allotted less time in the preschool curriculum to create time for more push-down academics. This is a trend that is causing a lot of stress for young children and their families, who are worried about the education and well-being of their children.

Another way to address this myth is to bring teachers' and administrators' attention to the research showing that teaching more academics at a younger age does not really work and backfires. Studies with national representative samples are more convincing than studies with a small sample size. In addition, seeking alternative education offered by Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf schools is another way to address the myth. These schools usually offer quality education and do not disregard children's developmental stages.

As a society, we should focus on what children need rather than on what we want them to achieve. To do this, we need to abandon push-down academics and let children be what they are designed to be—children, having fun while learning.

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