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## KINDERGARTEN: MAGIC MOMENTS

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When a five-year-old enters the classroom for the first time, expectations of his parents and teachers are high, but still higher are the expectations of the child. S/he has heard of this magical day from the time words were understandable. However, the dreams and magical moments are quickly dispelled when s/he finds that s/he cannot conform to the demands of a regimented curriculum. S/he looks around the room at other children who seem to be laughing and doing their activities with ease. Most of them are drawing compliments on their neat work. But no matter how hard s/he tries, the work always seemed to be messy, and even s/he is not pleased with the results.

The small child who walked in with head held high now shuffles out with a dejected backward glance, for this child feels s/he cannot compete. School is not fun--it is exhausting when you are expected to do things you cannot. One may withdraw or may lash out angrily at one's more competent peers (Hammond, 1986). S/he certainly lets everyone know that s/he does not want to be in school. A failure is in the making.

Marie Clay (1979) says, "New entrants differ more, one from another, than at any other time in the next few years. This is because, in their preschool years, they have had very different kinds of experiences; whereas, in school they have many shared opportunities to learn." Although we know that children differ from each other in ways that affect how they learn and what they learn, these differences are not recognized often enough in kindergarten and elementary curricula. While the field of early education has given a great deal of thought to the importance of individual

differences, education policy has not demonstrated this awareness. We continue to operate under the antiquated system that assigns young children to school classes on the basis on their birth date alone. If they do not fit into the kindergarten class, it must be because they are failures or learning disabled. A marginal case, we assume, will eventually catch up; years and years of frustration and failure will have little or no effect.

Immaturity in kindergarten follows the child throughout subsequent school years. Frustration is a constant companion and low self-esteem becomes a personality trait. The child is classified by teachers as low achiever, and if s/he is lucky, is left alone in his/her misery. There is some possibility that some concerned teacher will refer the child to special education testing. S/he is then labeled, and the child's parents and teachers will expect less. Unfortunately, such a child will also be given less and receive less than s/he is truly capable of handling. Desire to learn and to achieve is now beaten down and ceases to exist. The child considers herself/himself a failure, a misfit--the real problem is a lack of maturity, not a lack of ability.

This scenario is repeated every day in schools across the United States, and will continue as long as we assign children to classes on the basis of their birth date alone. The Gesell Institute has indicated that many school difficulties, diagnosed as emotional disturbances, learning disabilities, under-achievement, or even minimal brain damage are the results of efforts by educators to force children to perform at levels for which they are not developmentally ready (Levenson, 1977). Studies have shown that approximately one-third of all chronologically five-year-old children are "Ready," for school, one-third is only marginally "Ready," and another one-third is "Not Ready" (Hammond, 1986). Research further tells us that the majority of these "Not Ready" children are boys, boys who do not develop the small motor skills as early as girls, boys with shorter attention spans. These boys are just too busy throwing the ball or swinging on the gym bars to bother with the fine-tuned motor skills needed for writing or coloring, activities practiced in the classroom. "Practically all hyperactive children are boys" (Williams, 1987). Boys need the freedom to expend aggression, to be visual, hands-on learners, yet the classroom requires an attentive audience, one that will sit quietly and listen.

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Before assuming that boys are the most damaged by over-placement, by what some have called the "Birth Date Effect" (Di Pasquale, Moule, and Flewelling, 1980), consider a study of youth suicides by Uphoff and Gilmore (1986). This study showed that while 45 percent of the male youth suicides were summer birth-date children, the figure rose to 83 percent for the female youth suicides who were summer birthdate children. This is truly shocking and bears further consideration.

A number of alternatives have been proposed and tried in an attempt to solve the problem of the "Not Ready" child. First, the birthdate cutoff can be pushed back from December to September or even earlier. After all, the age requirement was set early in this century, not because it was deemed the most educationally appropriate, but because it was the most convenient means of assigning children to suitable learning groups (Connell, 1987). This was necessary when floods of immigrant children began coming to America and schools needed to start their educational program. However, this pushback of the birthdate cutoff has only pushed back the problem, and it conflicts with the commitment many public schools have made to earlier and earlier intervention in the education of disadvantaged children.

A second alternative would be to use a developmental screening process to determine a child's readiness for school. There are a number of tests available and in use, such as the Gesell Developmental Evaluation, the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts, or the Metropolitan Readiness Test (Meisels, 1985). Some of these tests, however, are of dubious validity, and all of them would take a lot of time, money, equipment, and trained personnel, all of which are in short supply in most school systems.

A third alternative is to assign the "Not Ready" children to a developmental or transitional class. This is often perceived, however, as retaining the children, only under another name. And retaining children, or grade repetition, has proven to have only mixed, unpredictable results. While researchers believe that results can be positive, grade repetition can be damaging to a child's self-esteem and confidence. It can have a traumatic effect on both child and parents. The parental attitude is crucial to the results of grade repetition.

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The parental role is instrumental in yet another alternative, that of holding out their own "Not Ready" child for another year. Many parents do not have the training or knowledge to make this kind of decision a reliable alternative. Most parents are more concerned with seeing their child outfitted with new school clothes and enrolled in the best kindergarten class than in mental and emotional readiness factors. They leave that to the experts, not because they do not care, but because they trust the "experts" more than themselves.

Another alternative is found in the example set in the British Infant Schools and in the New Zealand schools. In these systems, all children enter into a non-graded class where they remain until they demonstrate an ability to pass on to the next level. In New Zealand, the children enter on the day of their fifth birthday. So, while entrance is determined by chronological age, progress is determined by achievement. John Goodlad has written a variation of this in his book, In a Place Called School (1984). He suggests admitting four-year-olds to an ungraded primary school, where the children would be moved from individual activities to parallel group activities and thence to true collaboration, picking up academic, physical, and social skills along the way. From there, the children would enter a four-year non-graded elementary school where they would concentrate on the application of the skills, including social skills. This alternative does depend on having teachers of equal caliber, since students will be under one teacher's influence for more than one year.

Accelerated academics in the early years has been a growing practice in the past thirty years, and it does generally go against what is known about developmental and learning theory. A final alternative is to push the academic curriculum back to the upper grades, and reduce the pressure on the younger children (Cornell, 1987; May and Welch, 1984; Upfoff and Gilmore, 1986). Young children do not need to be sitting quietly in their seats, doing a lot of paper and pencil tasks. They need to be moving and manipulating, experimenting and experiencing. The curriculum needs to be child-centered and process oriented, not task-oriented. Goodlad (1984) believes that schools must be understood as "little Villages" rather than factories, and

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that it is the schools themselves, not school systems or our blueprints for schools, that must be investigated.

It is this last alternative which seems to offer the most hope for our young children, our "Not Ready" students. It continues to encourage early intervention, it accepts children at their own developmental level, it allows children to progress at their own pace. It probably would not cost any more than current expenses; if anything, perhaps even less, if the need for remedial education were to drop.

The answer to declining SAT scores is not to increase the pressure on our young children, to "hurry" them through school, to cram their heads full of facts and information. This has been tried and the results have only increased our failures. Let us remediate not the child but our concept of what is best for the child. Let us really go back to the basics, begin at the beginning, with our kindergarten children. Let us keep the magic alive for all of our children past that first day of school.

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