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Sweat Shop or Piece of Pie, Is There a Moderate Road?

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What do you think of when considering a student for retention in kindergarten? Do you think of certain academic criteria that the student has failed to master, the maturity level and social development of the child or some balance between these two? Do you consider what retention could do to the self-image of the child and/or how well the parents can cope with their child's retention? When you make that retention decision, are you absolutely sure that it is in the best interest of the child?

You should be asking yourself all of these questions, and more, when contemplating the retention of any student in your kindergarten class.

After teaching four years in the Boston area, I moved to a small midwestern town where I accepted a position teaching kindergarten. Along with my students I've learned a lot this year, including a great deal about teaching philosophies in other parts of our country, especially in regard to retention.

In mid-January the most popular topic of conversation among primary teachers in the teachers' lounge was retention, due in part to a memo from the principal stating that all Retention Referral Forms were due by February 1 and in part to an extreme preoccupation with the subject by kindergarten teachers. The most frequently asked question was, "How many are you failing?" At a time when many of my colleagues were compiling a list of possible retentions that in some cases reached the double digit numbers, I had not yet considered that any of my students needed to

fail. As time went on, I began to feel the pressure from the other teachers. I felt I had to meet some kind of quota and that they felt my philosophy of retention was totally wrong.

When any teacher decides to fail five to fourteen students from one class something is wrong somewhere. In the case of this particular school system, I believed two things were wrong: 1) there were no set guidelines or criteria on retention for teachers to follow, 2) expectations of kindergarten students were much too high. And I was warned, "If your students don't do well in first grade, you'll really hear about it." I believe that kindergarten teachers should be less sensitive to the carping of first grade teachers; they should not over react and retain more students than can profit from retention.

Kindergarten should be a time of development for the child, a time in life where a whole new world opens up to a child to experience and learn new things. The goal of kindergarten should be to prepare the child for his academic career, focusing on such things as building a positive self-image, relating to peers and adults other than parents, developing language skills and reading and math readiness skills, and development of gross and fine motor skills.

My fellow kindergarten teachers seemed to feel that a child is not ready for first grade unless he knows the sound/symbol relationship of all the letters of the alphabet (although our readiness series only focuses on 13 letters). In addition to this, by the end of the year the child must be able to decode, encode, and write a large number of 3 and 4 letter words (words that can be made from any combination of the 13 intensively studied letters), and recognize 23 sight words. These children are also expected to exhibit a great amount of fine motor control. The handwriting papers these teachers expect from their 5 year olds would put a second grader to shame!

What I feel is happening is that the teachers simply expect too much from these children. There is

a thing called a "teachable moment," i.e., unless children are ready to perform certain tasks, there are no gimmicks, learning games, "right" reading series, amount of scolding from the teacher, or reinforcement lessons that will make them learn the material any faster.

As educators of kindergarten children we should ask ourselves two questions: 1) am I providing an atmosphere of frustration for these children by trying to feed too much into little minds that are not ready to be overloaded? 2) is my goal to teach my students that school is a place to produce or should I teach my students that school is a place where one finds learning to be a joyful experience and one that teaches the child to eventually be a productive individual in our society? We should focus more on the strengths of each child and less on the weaknesses. Our main emphasis should be on accomplishment of grade related tasks, rather than failure of tasks that are too advanced for the child to achieve successfully.