Too Much Too Soon? An Analysis of the Discourses Used by Policy Advocates in the Debate over Kindergarten

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Abstract: In recent years, a debate over kindergarten has ensued. We refer to the actors in this debate as *developmentalists*, on the one hand*,* and *academic advocates*, on the other. Developmentalists argue that kindergarten should be centered on child-initiated play and intentional teaching through play, art activities, and hands on activities. Academic advocates argue that young children are capable of learning academic content in kindergarten and that academic instruction is necessary to help some students "catch up" before formal schooling begins. In this paper, we identify the key policy organizations engaged in this debate and analyze the ways they construct their arguments and critique the positions of their opponents. We find that, when discussing their vision for

kindergarten, developmentalists and academic advocates share similar goals and views. However, when we analyze the ways the two agendas discuss kindergarten as it is practiced today, clear divisions emerge. Specifically, the agendas use different types of causal narratives to describe the problems with kindergarten and how it got that way. We conclude with a discussion of policy implications and directions for future research.

Keywords: Early childhood education, kindergarten; educational policy; politics of education; discourse analysis; policy advocacy organizations

¿Muy pronto? Un análisis de los discursos utilizados por los defensores de la política en el debate sobre el jardín de infantes

Resumen: En los últimos años, se ha producido un debate jardín de infancia. Nos referimos a los jugadores en este debate como desarrollista, por el contrario, y defensores académicos, por el otro. Desarrollista argumentan que el jardín de infancia se debe centrar en algo iniciado por el niño y la enseñanza intencional a través del juego, actividades de arte y actividades "manos". Defensores académicos sostienen que los niños son capaces de aprender contenidos académicos en el jardín de infancia y se necesitan instrucciones académicas para ayudar a algunos estudiantes que siguen la educación formal antes de que comience. En este artículo, se identificó que las organizaciones políticas fundamentales implicados en este debate y examinar formas en que construyen sus argumentos y critican las posiciones de sus oponentes. Nuestro análisis revela que mientras que los defensores del desarrollo y académicos comparten muchas de las mismas metas y visiones del jardín de infancia, difieren significativamente en la forma en que discuten el jardín de infantes como es. Concluimos con una discusión de las implicaciones políticas y direcciones para la investigación futura.

Palabras clave: educación de la primera infancia; jardín de infancia; política educativa; el análisis del discurso; organizaciones de defensa de la política

Muito em pouco tempo? Uma análise dos discursos utilizados por defensores de políticas no debate sobre o jardim de infância

Resumo: Nos últimos anos, um debate sobre jardim de infância ocorreu. Nos referimos aos intervenientes nesse debate como *desenvolvimentistas*, por outro lado, e defensores acadêmicos, por outro. Desenvolvimentistas argumentam que o jardim de infância deve ser centrado em algo iniciado pela criança e ensino intencional através de brincadeiras, atividades de arte, e atividades "mão na massa". Defensores acadêmicos argumentam que crianças são capazes de aprender conteúdo acadêmico no jardim de infância e que instruções acadêmicas são necessárias para ajudar alguns estudantes a acompanhar a escolaridade formal antes que esta comece. Neste artigo, identificamos que as organizações políticas fundamentais envolvidas neste debate e analisar os meios que eles constroem seus argumentos e criticam as posições de seus oponentes. Nossa análise revela que, enquanto desenvolvimentistas e defensores acadêmicos compartilham muitos dos mesmos objetivos e visões sobre o jardim de infância, eles diferem significantemente na forma que discutem jardim de infância como é. Concluímos com uma discussão de implicações políticas e direções para futuras pesquisas.

Palavras-chave: Educação infantil; jardim de infância; política educacional; analise do discurso; organizações de defesa política

Introduction

> We grant space and time to young plants and animals because we know that, in
> accordance with the laws that live in them, they will develop properly and grow well
> […] but the young human being is looked upon as a piece of wax, a lump of clay,
> which man can mold into what he pleases. O man, who roamest through garden and
> field, through meadow and grove, why dost thou close thy mind to the silent
> teaching of nature?
>
> <div align="right">-Friedrich Froebel, The Education of Man, 1889</div>

Expressed in this epigraph is the central tenet of Froebel's kindergarten—deference to a child's natural course of development and [early] education that is "passive, following (only guarding and protecting), not prescriptive, categorical, interfering" (Froebel, p. 7, 1889). Ever since the development of the Froebelian kindergarten in the 1830s, there has been an ongoing debate about whether kindergarten should be more developmental or academic in focus (Cuban, 1992; Dombkowski, 2001; Russell, 2011). And while the debate is not a new one, it has intensified in recent years. Echoing concerns of some early education experts over a shift toward academic content at the expense of play-based development, news headlines proclaim "Why Did Kindergarten Just Become Another Grade?" (Gershon, 2015), "Crisis in Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School" (Miller and Almon, 2009), and "Welcome to Kindergarten. Take This Test. And This One." (Neason, 2015). Significant accountability pressures, amplified with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), are often blamed for an increased emphasis on academic skills training in kindergarten (Hatch, 2002; Jeynes, 2006; Snow & Pizzolongo, 2014). The introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has further intensified the debate, with opponents arguing that the standards for early grades are developmentally inappropriate (Main, 2012; Pondiscio, 2015; Strauss, 2015).

In this article, we examine the discourses used by proponents and opponents of the growing emphasis on academic content in kindergarten. Understanding that there is not a clear dichotomy between those who would adopt a more academic focus in kindergarten and those who would oppose it, we rely on Russell's (2011) definition of developmental and academic logics of instruction in kindergarten. According to Russell (2011), the developmental logic frames the purposes of kindergarten as supporting children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The academic logic emphasizes acquisition of academic skills and content. Understanding the discourses employed by actors in this debate is critical because discourses shape public understanding and positions on policy issues (Fairclough, 2003). They set boundaries on which specific issues are considered to be policy problems and influence which values, policy solutions, and actors are best suited to address the problems (Fisher, 2003). Given that strategic action through discourse can ultimately shape which policies are, or are not, advanced, it is vital to understand how policy organizations promulgate narratives regarding kindergarten—a policy area with especially high stakes.

A robust literature shows that the quality of children's early educational experiences is critical, with effects that cascade into a host of later life outcomes (e.g., Barnett, 2011; Chetty et al., 2011). Chetty et al. (2011), for example, analyzed data from Project STAR in Tennessee and found that children who are assigned to a K-3 classroom that is one standard deviation higher in quality earn 3% more at age 27 and are more likely to attend college and enroll in higher quality colleges than those assigned to a lower-quality classroom. Specific observable features of kindergarten, including the structure (e.g., class size) and content covered (e.g. advanced mathematics instruction), have been shown to have meaningful impacts on children's educational outcomes (Chetty et al., 2011; Claessens, Engel, & Curran, 2013). While there is evidence that increased rigor and academic

content taught in kindergarten may be beneficial (Clements & Sarama 2007; Duncan et al., 2007; Watts et al., 2015), there is also evidence that these academic gains may come at the expense of social and behavioral competencies (Huffman & Speer, 2000; Stipek, 2006; Stipek et al., 1995). Given the prominence of this debate both in the public sphere and among researchers, it is critical to understand the political forces at play that are shaping the agenda to embed more academic content in kindergarten.

We begin this paper with a historical overview of the debate over kindergarten, including a review of the recent empirical literature on the extent to which kindergarten has become more academic. Next, we identify the major policy organizations in the debate. We refer to these organizations as *developmentalists*, on the one hand*, and *academic advocates*, on the other. Having identified the major players in the developmentalist and academic advocate agendas, we then examine the discourses they use through content analysis of the documents they generate. It is important to note that we do not intend to determine which agenda is "correct" and which is "wrong." Rather, we seek to understand the ways in which each agenda today is constructing their arguments and critiquing the positions of their opponents. Specifically, our analysis focuses on how the agendas define (1) the purposes and goals of an ideal kindergarten and (2) the problems with kindergarten as practiced. We find that, when defining the purposes and goals of ideal kindergarten, that is to say, *kindergarten as it should be*, developmentalists and academic advocates articulate similar visions. But, when portraying the problems associated with kindergarten *as it is*, stark divisions arise between the groups on a range of key issue areas, including the Common Core standards. After presenting evidence for these findings, we conclude by considering their relation to the existing literature and policy implications as well as the limitations of our approach.

Background

Early Beginnings

Established in the 1830s, the first kindergartens in the US were based upon the Froebellian notion of early education. Dombkowski (2001) notes, "the kindergarten focused on spiritual and character development during what Froebel believed was a particularly malleable period of life. Play, guided by a well-trained and motherly teacher, was at the center of Froebelian pedagogy" (p. 528). These programs were initially funded by private charities and were meant to serve poor children in urban areas to "build moral, healthy, and industrious children out of unhealthy, neglected four-to six-year-olds" (Cuban, 1992, p. 174).

From the latter part of the 19th century to the mid-20th century, the number of kindergartens grew steadily and, with increasing public funding, became firmly institutionalized within school systems. This increase was driven by several factors, including growing numbers of middle-class women entering the workforce and requiring care for their children in the years after the First World War (Cuban, 1992; Russell, 2011; Tyack & Cuban, 1997). As enrollments in kindergarten increased during these decades, so too did debates over the purpose and goals of kindergarten instruction. Summarizing this emerging tension, Cuban (1992) notes:

> A struggle emerged between those who adhered to the Froebelian principles of the child's nature, the heavy symbolism in the methods and materials of gifts and occupations (art, music, and handicrafts), and those who wished to adapt these principles to the American setting and the emerging research on how children developed. The struggle pitted those trained in the fixed sequence of materials presented to students, the teacher's scripted responses, and a Froebelian orthodoxy against those who saw much merit in Froebelian materials and processes but, deeply

influenced by the work of psychologists G. S. Hall and later Edward Thorndike, sought more pragmatic approaches to teaching five-year-olds (p. 180).

Throughout the progressive era, as kindergartens spread across the country, the Frobelian kindergarten evolved and became tailored to the American context. Additionally, new pedagogical approaches were also being introduced. A prime example of this is the spread of Montessori education to America. In a practitioner journal comparing Froebel and Montessori, Stevens (1912) notes that Maria Montessori has an advantage over Froebel in that "she is living at a time when she can make use of the results of the experimental psychology and child-study of the last half-century" (p. 254). After the Second World War, however, the debate shifted again— this time in the context of the War on Poverty reforms of the 1960s (Dombkowski, 2001; Russell, 2011).

The War on Poverty

Launched in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, Project Head Start represented a major expansion of early childhood education beyond kindergarten (Kalifeh, Cohen-Vogel, & Grass, 2011). Head Start is a program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that provides comprehensive early education, health, nutrition and parental engagement services to low-income children and their families. Motivated by a growing national desire to "break the cycle of poverty", the introduction of Head Start programs further amplified the tension between early childhood education and elementary education (Dombkowski, 2001). Nestled between these two worlds, kindergarten now occupied a liminal space. From the grades above kindergarten, there was pressure to align practices to help ease the transition into first grade and jumpstart children's academic preparation, especially since Head Start and other preschool programs were now available to achieve the goal of socializing children to school. From below, there was pressure for kindergarten to align with preschool practices in order to help sustain the gains made in programs like Head Start, especially since studies evaluating Head Start and other preschool programs found short-lived treatment effects (Currie & Thomas, 1993; Zigler & Valentine, 1979). Dombkowski (2001) aptly characterizes this complexity and tension:

> In many ways, kindergarten in the 1970s was the 'no-man's land of education', lost amidst the surge of pedagogical and policy foci on Head Start and primary curricular reform. The extant lack of continuity between early childhood and later education was exacerbated by reforms in different directions at different levels, communicating conflicting values to teachers, parents, and children (p. 539).

Despite continuous debate over kindergarten's underlying goals and purposes, Americans continued to support further expansion of early childhood education. By the 1990s, kindergartens were nearly universal in public schools across the country and many states were developing prekindergarten programs for 4-year-olds (Bainbridge at al., 2005). Moreover, many states were extending kindergarten programs to from part-day to full-day. To many, kindergarten was now recognized as the beginning of a child's academic life (Dombkowski, 2001). However, while kindergarten became the *de facto* start of a child's academic life, as of 2014, only 16 states required kindergarten attendance through statute (NCES, 2014).

The Standards and Accountability Era

In 1983, Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*, a landmark report questioning the efficacy of the U.S. educational system. In response, a series of "excellence" reforms, including academic standards and accountability, spread

across the country in the following decades (Mehta, 2013). In response to many of these reforms, concerns were raised about potential negative effects on kindergarten and early education more broadly. Specifically, there was concern that the reforms would increase the pressure to align kindergarten to higher grades, and push kindergarten teachers to focus more on academic content (Dombkowski, 2001).

These concerns were amplified after the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. Some argue that NCLB's requirement that states test all children annually beginning in the third grade has created an "accountability shove-down" where pressure to prepare students for these tests leads to developmentally inappropriate changes in both content and instructional practices in earlier grades (Hatch, 2002; Jeynes, 2006; Russell, 2011).

More recently, advocates have warned that the Common Core State Standards for early grades will exacerbate the trend toward what some have called the "academicization" of kindergarten (Miller & Almon, 2009). Recent studies have provided some evidence for these claims. They suggest that accountability reforms have led K-2 teachers and administrators to feel intense pressure to prepare students for third grade standardized assessments. Booher-Jennings (2005), for example, finds that lower-grade teachers are blamed by teachers in tested grades for students' poor performance on state tests. These teachers argue that lower-grade teachers do not adequately prepare the students for later academic demands. Jacob (2005) shows that, in response to increased accountability pressure, elementary school administrators increasingly retain students in K-2 in order to avoid high-stakes testing in third grade. Other studies suggest that administrators place lower-performing teachers into untested (early) elementary grades so that higher-quality teachers staff the tested grades (Cohen-Vogel, 2011; Grissom, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2014).

In a recent, comprehensive study of kindergarten between 1998 and 2010, Bassok, Latham, and Rorem (2016) find substantial changes in terms of kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness, time spent on academic content, classroom organization, pedagogical approaches, and use of standardized assessments. They note 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" (p. 1). For example, the percentage of kindergarten teachers who reported that their student's received art instruction daily, whether directly from the primary teacher or in a specialized unified arts class, decreased from from 27% in 1998 to 11% in 2010. Further, the researchers find that these shifts towards more academic content in kindergarten are most pronounced in schools serving high proportions of low-income and non-White children (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016).

Having provided a historical overview of the debate about kindergarten and highlighted empirical evidence on the changing nature of kindergarten in recent years, we now turn to identifying the key policy organizations engaged in the debate today before analyzing their discourses.

The Players

In order to help us identify the key policy organizations engaged in this debate in the US, we surveyed a sample of experts in the early childhood education field. The purpose of the survey was twofold: (1) to help us identify the key policy organizations engaged in this debate, and (2) to understand how researchers categorize organizations as either developmentalists or academic advocates. We used the survey to support our own research and understanding of the advocacy

landscape. The key organizations identified in this paper were selected based upon a synthesis of the survey results and our own analysis of organization websites and documents.

To generate our sampling frame for the survey, we collected the names of all authors of early childhood education studies published in American Educational Research Association (AERA) journals. Specifically, we identified the authors who published at least one study in any of the seven AERA-affiliated journals between January 1, 2010, and January 1, 2016, that included "kindergarten," "prekindergarten," "preschool," or "early education" within the article's abstract. These search parameters yielded an initial sample of 102 authors. Next, we collected the email addresses of all identified authors by searching public websites. Twelve authors were excluded from the sample because they either conducted research exclusively outside of the US or were not focused on early childhood education research. Ninety researchers comprised the final sample.

Two variations of the survey were randomly sent by email to members of the final sample. The first provided respondents with a list of organizations and asked respondents to categorize each as "Primarily Developmentalist," "Primarily Academic Advocate," "Neither," or, "I don't know." The second format did not pre-identify organizations; rather, it prompted respondents to list organizations under three separate headings: (1) Organizations that you would consider to be primarily developmentalists, (2) Organizations that you would consider to be primarily academic advocates, and (3) Organizations that are involved in the discussion, but you are unsure how to categorize them (See Appendix B for the two survey instruments).

The survey was launched in mid-January, 2016, and was open for response for three weeks. One week into data collection, a reminder was sent out to all non-responding sample members to complete the survey. In total, 25 of the 90 sampled authors responded to the survey, resulting in a final response rate of 27.8%. While the response rate was low, we used the responses in concert with our own analysis of statements from each policy organization to place them on the developmental-academic advocate scale.

In Table 1, we list the key policy organizations, their mission statements, and whether they lean towards a developmentalist or academic approach toward kindergarten. Our leaning classification here is estimated using our own understanding of the field, the input we received from other experts using the survey results, and our analysis of documents. In some cases, where experts were split in terms of their categorization of an organization, we relied on the positions of the organization as embodied in their mission statement and the positions they take on specific issues (e.g. Common Core) to determine their leaning.

To illustrate, some may find our classification of the National Association of Young Children (NAEYC) as leaning toward an academic approach, surprising given the organization's emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice. While a plurality of survey respondents classified the organization as primarily developmentalist, some respondents classified the organization as primarily academic, and even more responded that they were unsure of how to classify the organization. Given this ambiguous result from the survey, we then turned to analyze the position statements of the NAEYC. Because the organization published clear position statements in support of "high-quality, challenging, and accessible mathematics education for three-to-six-year-old children" (NAEYC, 2010a), program evaluation and accountability schemes (NAEYC, 2009a), Common Core standards in early elementary school (NAEYC, 2010b), and early learning content standards (Aligned to the Common Core) (NAEYC, 2005, 2009b), we categorized the NAEYC as leaning academic. These positions are consistent with the framework and the positions of other academic advocacy organizations.

Table 1.

Developmentalist and Academic Advocate Organizations and Mission Statements

The Developmentalists	
Organization	**Mission Statement**
Alliance for Childhood	The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. Our public education campaigns bring to light both the promise and the vulnerability of childhood. We act for the sake of the children themselves and for a more just, democratic, and ecologically responsible future.
American Association of Pediatrics	The mission of the American Academy of Pediatrics is to attain optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents and young adults. To accomplish this, AAP shall support the professional needs of its members.
Defending the Early Years	Defending the Early Years (DEY) seeks to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. The principal goals of the project are: (1) To mobilize the early childhood community to speak out with well-reasoned arguments against inappropriate standards, assessments, and classroom practices; (2) To track the effects of new standards, especially those linked to the Common Core State Standards, on early childhood education policy and practice; and (3) To promote appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and support educators in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices.
The Academic Advocates	
Organization	**Mission Statement**
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics	The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics is the public voice of mathematics education, supporting teachers to ensure equitable mathematics learning of the highest quality for all students through vision, leadership, professional development, and research.
Student Achievement Partners	Student Achievement Partners was founded by David Coleman, Susan Pimentel and Jason Zimba, lead writers of the Common Core State Standards. We are a non-profit organization with one purpose: to help all students and teachers see their hard work lead to greater student achievement.
National Association of Elementary School Principals	The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), founded in 1921, is a professional organization serving elementary and middle school principals and other education leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and overseas. NAESP advocates for the support principals need to be successful 21st century leaders—to achieve the highest results for children, families, and communities.
National Association for the Education of Young Children	The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional membership organization that works to promote high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age 8, by connecting early childhood practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children.
National Institute for Early Education Research	The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) conducts and communicates research to support high-quality, effective early childhood education for all young children. Such education enhances their physical, cognitive, and social development, and subsequent success in school and later life.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, we begin by defining discourse analysis as it is used herein, specifically its use as a post-positivist approach to policy analysis. Next, we describe how this definition motivated us to focus on ideas about the two types of discourses used by kindergarten reformers: 1) discourses that guide the ideas about the ideal kindergarten and 2) discourses that frame problems with kindergarten. We then describe the conceptual frameworks— Russell's (2011) *logics of kindergarten instruction* and Stone's (2002) *causal stories*— that informed our analysis of these two discourse types.

The field of discourse analysis is vast, with perspectives ranging from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough et al., 2011) to conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) to interactional sociolinguistics (Fishman, 1970)—and definitions of terms within each are equally numerous (Gee, 2014). In the present study, our understanding of discourse is informed by the work of Fischer and Forester (1993) in what they call the *argumentative turn* in policy analysis. This framework positions discourse analysis within the policy-making process and recognizes that the policy-making process "is a constant discursive struggle over the criteria of social classification, the boundaries of problem categories, the intersubjective interpretation of common experiences, the conceptual framing of problems, and the definitions of ideas that guide the ways people create shared meanings which motivate them to act" (Fischer & Forester, 1993, p. 2). In adopting Fischer and Forester (1993), our study shines a light on the ways people and organizations construct ideas about the appropriate role of kindergarten in society and frame problems associated with it.

This focus on language in the policy process represents a challenge to a field that has been dominated by positivist and empiricist epistemological assumptions (Fischer, 1998; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Recognizing the challenge, Fischer (1998) promotes a post-positivist conception of policy analysis that addresses the "multidimensional complexity of social reality" (p. 129) and the role language plays in constructing reality. Furthermore, Fisher (1998) notes that "as a discursive orientation grounded in practical reason, the post-positivist approach [to policy analysis] situates empirical inquiry in a broader interpretive framework. More than just an epistemological alternative, the approach is offered as a better description of what social scientists actually do in practice" (p. 129).

To further guide our analysis of the discourses used by key organizations in both agendas, we rely on two conceptual frameworks—the first focused on how the organizations portray kindergarten *as it should be* and the second focused on how they portray kindergarten *as it is*, or more precisely, the *problems* they perceive with it. We draw upon Coburn's (2001) *logics of instruction* and Russell's (2011) subsequent application of it to kindergarten to examine the ways actors within the organizations describe kindergarten as it should be—that is, the purposes, goals, and nature of an ideal kindergarten. We then apply Deborah Stone's causal stories framework (1989) to identify strategies through which actors in both agendas define problems they associate with kindergarten as it is delivered. We examine both how actors define kindergarten *as it should be* and the problems they perceive with kindergarten *as it is* because both perspectives are critical components to policy actors' use of language to advance their agendas and engage in the argumentative nature of the policy process as Fischer and Forester (1993) detail. In the former, how organizations explicate the purposes, goals, and nature of their particular issue area sets the guardrails of potential alternatives open for consideration. In the latter, how organizations detail the problems associated with their particular issue helps to set the basis from which policy alternatives are considered and demonstrate the distance between the world *as it is* and the world *as is should be*. Together, the analysis of both perspectives provides insights into how policy actors "deliberately and consciously fashion portrayals so as to promote their favored course of action" (Stone, 2002, p. 133). In the sections that follow, we describe the two conceptual frameworks and our applications of them.

Logics of Instruction in Kindergarten

Originating from sociology and organizational theory, the term *logics* here refers to "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1990, p. 804). Coburn (2001) built upon this idea to advance a *logics of instruction*. Her *logics of instruction* include:

> goals for instruction, underlying epistemological assumptions about the nature of learning, conceptions of teacher and student roles, schemas or scripts that organize instruction, as well as specific instructional practices and materials that become bundled together and gain legitimacy in the environment at a particular historical moment (p. 12).

Extending Coburn's (2001) work, Russell (2011) specified two competing *logics of instruction* with regard to kindergarten specifically. Russell (2011) posited a *developmental logic*, which frames the purpose of kindergarten as supporting children's social and emotional well being, as well as an *academic logic*, stressing the importance of academic skill and content acquisition in kindergarten. As Russell (2011) notes, "the distinction between kindergarten logics is not meant to imply that classrooms are exclusively academic or developmental but rather that two contrasting models of education have been consistently present in discourse about kindergarten" (p. 239). We use Russell's (2011) framework to help us answer: How do organizations on both sides of the agenda frame the ideal kindergarten? Specifically, we focus on four dimensions: (1) goals and purposes, (2) pedagogical approach and teacher role, (3) curricular content, and (4) the roles assessment plays in kindergarten— as portrayed by developmentalists and academic advocates. We utilize the framework, shown in Table 2, to guide our document coding, exploring whether distinctions are apparent in the discourses used by policy organizations engaged in this debate. Specifically, through analysis of the documents produced by these organizations, we work to test whether the distinctions articulated in the framework hold up when examining how ideas about kindergarten *as it should be* are expressed.

Table 2.
Models of Kindergarten

	Developmentalist Model	Academic Advocate Model
Goals and Purposes		
	Transition to formal school environment by focusing on the social and behavioral skills necessary for success in school;	Prepare students with the necessary skills and knowledge needed for success in school;
	Limited exposure to academic content	Focus on acquisition of basic academic content
Pedagogical Approach and Teacher Role		
	Student-directed activities;	Teacher-directed activities;
	Hands-on activities with a lot of child discretion;	Teacher "scaffolding" guides children to predetermined learning experiences
	Teacher loosely "scaffolds" child-centered learning	
Curricular Content		
	Strong emphasis on social and emotional development;	Basic academic skills, with an emphasis on early numeracy and literacy skills;
	Use of manipulatives and concrete materials, learning centers, and free play	Abstract materials, including worksheets and flashcards
Role of Assessment		
	Formative in nature and focused on observation of student behavior and work products	Formal assessment procedures to ensure school readiness across a range of domains

Adapted from Russell, J. L. (2011).

Defining the Problems Associated with Kindergarten

While the Russell (2011) framework helps us reveal the agendas' ideas about kindergarten as it should be, it doesn't offer guidance for understanding how the organizations that lean developmentalist and those that lean academic advocate frame the problems with kindergarten as it is practiced today. For that, we invoke Stone's (1989) causal stories framework to guide our analysis of kindergarten *as it is*— specifically, the problems with kindergarten, as outlined by the policy

organizations themselves. Analysis of problem framing and definition is critical because the way a problem is specified often leads to the formulation and adoption of a particular type of policy solution, one that is seen as "natural" and "sensible" for addressing the problem at hand (Kingdon & Thurber, 1984; Sabatier, 1988). To understand problem framing, Stone (1989) argues that attention should be afforded to the causal stories that agenda advocates employ. In Stone's words:

> Causal theories, if they are successful, do more than convincingly demonstrate the possibility of human control over bad conditions. First, they can either challenge or protect an existing social order. Second, by identifying causal agents, they can assign responsibility to particular political actors so that someone will have to stop an activity, do it differently, compensate its victims, or possibly face punishment. Third, they can legitimate and empower particular actors as 'fixers' of the problem. And fourth, they can create new political alliances among people who are shown to stand in the same victim relationship to the causal agent (p. 295).

Stone argues that causal stories can be one of four types: "Mechanical," "Accidental," "Intentional," and "Inadvertent" (see Figure 1). These four narrative types differ from one another on two key domains—the purposefulness of the actions taken and whether the consequences of those actions were intended.

Consequences		
	Intended	Unintended
Actions — Unguided	Mechanical Cause	Accidental Cause
Actions — Purposeful	Intentional Cause	Inadvertent Cause

Figure 1. *Stone's Causal Stories Framework.* Adapted from Stone, D. A. (1989).

According to Stone (1989), the two most effective causal stories, in terms of leading to desired policy outcomes, are the "accidental" and "intentional" narratives. The former represents actions that are unguided and the consequences of these actions are unintended. Accidental narratives are effective in that no individual or group can be assigned blame for the consequences. The intentional narrative represents actions that are guided and the consequences of these actions are intended. This approach is effective because it casts an individual as knowingly and willfully causing either harm or good.

The remaining two causal story types, which Stone (1989) sees as less effective, include the "inadvertent" and "mechanical." Inadvertent causes represent action that is guided, but the consequences of this action are unintended. To illustrate, Stone (2002) cites rent control, wherein a policy with a purpose of lowering the cost of renting inadvertently pushes landlords out of the market, ultimately raising rental prices. Finally, mechanical causes have no guided action but are designed, programmed, or trained by humans to yield intended consequences. Stone (2002) notes that, "The idea of mechanical cause is that somebody acts purposefully, but their will is carried out through other people, through machines, or through 'automatic' social procedures and routines" (p. 193). To illustrate mechanical cause, Stone (2002) cites an example of a policy or program that is implemented by "subordinates who rigidly follow orders and fail to exercise their own discretion," and as a result, "problems might be understood as the result of humans acting like automatons" (p. 193).

In addition to the four causal stories, Stone (1989) outlined the possibility for "complex narratives" that frame a problem as part of a complex and large-scale issue to which it is impossible to assign blame. According to Stone (1989),

> The social systems necessary to solve modern problems are inherently complex. [....]
> In such complex, interactive systems, it is impossible to anticipate all possible events
> and effects, so failure and accident is inevitable. Failures also involve so many
> components and people that it is impossible to attribute blame in any fashion
> consistent with our cultural norm that responsibility presupposes control (p. 195).

Complex narratives, according to the author, act similarly to accidental or natural causes, where actors can eschew blame given that no individual or organization is culpable. She notes that, "Without overarching control, there can be no purpose—and no responsibility" (Stone, 2002, p. 196).

Policy actors use these narratives to set and/or shift the story about a particular problem so that it is "seen as caused by human actions and amendable to human intervention" (Stone, 1989, p. 281). In an application of Stone's framework, Harrison and Cohen-Vogel (2012) note that, "This contest of 'causality' forms a dialectical process in which 'blame' for an unfavorable condition may be assigned or deflected, and targets for policy action identified or negated" (p. 520). By adopting Stone's (2002) Causal Stories framework to identify the narratives used by developmentalists and academic-leaning organizations as "accidental," "intentional," "inadvertent," "mechanical," or "complex," we identify how they frame the problems with kindergarten and who or what is to blame for them.

Methodology

Document Collection

For each policy organization identified above, we searched the organization's website to identify data sources using the terms "academic content," "developmentally appropriate," "changes in early education," "child-centered education," and their variants. In cases where the organization's website did not have a search feature, we scanned every webpage, identifying all relevant resources. We limited our search to documents published after 2001, since much of the research and popular accounts of the changing nature of kindergarten cite the passage of NCLB as the start of the current era (Bassok et al., 2016; Miller & Allmon, 2009; Russell, 2011). This search yielded 61 documents, which included published reports, policy briefs, position statements, and blog posts. Next, we scanned every document, refining our sample to include only sources that were focused on the

debate about the nature of kindergarten. To illustrate this refinement process, a document from the NAEYC titled, "What the Research Says: Gender-Typed Toys," was excluded from the base sample because it was not explicitly focused on the changing nature of kindergarten, developmentally appropriate practice, or the increasing emphasis on academic content in kindergarten. Our final analytic sample consisted of 39 documents. In Appendix A, we provide a summary of information about each document, including its title, organization from which the data were excerpted, document type, source link, and a document number. Document numbers are used in the findings to refer to the specific sources quoted.

Data Analysis

We used pattern coding to identify constructs in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our first stage of coding employed a set of a priori codes from our two theoretical frameworks; they included, for example, "intentional cause" and "goals and purposes of kindergarten". We allowed for codes to emerge inductively from the data, which included "common core" and "dichotomy," for example. We also added attributes to the coded documents, including the authoring organization, its orientation in the developmental-academic debate, and the type of document (position statement, blog post, etc.) to facilitate interpretation of code excerpts. We looked for patterns in the coded data to identify major narratives and also looked for similarities and differences across the two agendas. An overview of the final coding structure used in this analysis is provided in Appendix C.

Results

Kindergarten as It Should be: A False Dichotomy?

In contrast to some recent media coverage that stresses diametrically opposed views for kindergarten, we find limited evidence that the key policy organizations engaged in the discussion about kindergarten support the dichotomized framework posited by Russell (2011). As we show below, when discussing the stated goals and purposes, pedagogical approaches and teacher roles, curricular content, and the roles assessment plays in kindergarten, the developmentalists and academic advocates articulate similar visions for kindergarten.

Goals and purposes. Both developmentalists and academic advocates share a vision of kindergarten that is child-centered, playful, hands-on, and developmentally appropriate. Both groups see kindergarten as a place where children prepare for formal schooling by developing the necessary social skills and behaviors needed to be successful learners. For example, one developmentalist document describes kindergarten as having "plenty of space and time for unstructured play and discovery, art and music, practicing social skills, and learning to enjoy learning" (1) while an academic advocate similarly describes it as providing, "a wide range of experiences, opportunities, resources and contexts that will provoke, stimulate, and support children's innate intellectual dispositions" (27).

The two groups of organizations diverge slightly in their definitions of readiness for formal schooling, including the specific skills and competencies (beyond social and behavioral skills) that children should develop in kindergarten. Academic advocates frame kindergarten as a means to jump-start children's learning and to compensate for the disadvantage that low-income children may face in their early learning environments. Unlike the developmentalists, academic advocates believe that, "policymakers and educators should explicitly define [school] readiness" (34) and that there is a threshold of readiness that each student needs to meet in order to be ready for school. The

following two excerpts from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, respectively, underscore this idea:

> Young children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are already vulnerable and at risk, demonstrating lower mathematical knowledge than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Regardless of the ages of our students, we are challenged to make up for the inequities that our students have experienced (19).
>
> The goal is that by the end of the school year, every child has—or is on a developmental trajectory to soon attain and demonstrate on a regular basis—the knowledge and skills needed for kindergarten success (27).

Developmentalists, on the other hand, do not define specific learning outcomes or readiness levels required of kindergarten. They believe that development cannot be accelerated, and that individual children must build their own ideas through play and hands-on activities. Learning in this way, they say, provides "a gradual progression that is solid and unshakable" (12). Rather than stressing particular skills or content, kindergarten for developmentalists should be "an atmosphere that encourages exploration and creativity and lays a strong foundation for emerging literacy, numeracy, and other vital capacities" (1).

       Pedagogical approach and teacher role. In terms of the pedagogical approach and role of the teacher that is ideal in kindergarten, developmentalist and academic advocate policy organizations speak a common language. Both groups argue that instruction in kindergarten should be largely child-centered with the thoughtful support and scaffolding of a teacher. As a developmentalist organization notes:

> Teachers need to understand the ways in which child-initiated play when combined with playful, intentional teaching leads to lifelong benefits in ways that didactic drills, standardized tests, and scripted teaching do not (1).

Similarly, an academic advocacy organization notes:

> To foster such learning, principals should encourage teachers to engage with their students in such activities as whole group, small group, and center-based instruction; indoor and outdoor play; loud and quiet learning activities; and, depending on the length of the school day, eating snacks and possibly taking a rest (22).

Relatedly, both groups stress that the role of the teacher is less about teachers transferring knowledge to students and more about setting the conditions for children to have rich, edifying experiences. For example, one organization that has a primarily developmentalist point of view states that stakeholders in kindergarten should "work to ensure that teachers provide well-thought out educational experiences that demonstrate knowledge and respect for each child" (15). An academic advocacy organization, in stressing the importance of early mathematics education, writes that, "preschoolers learn mathematics through concrete experiences with materials and through intentional interactions by their teachers to extend their thinking" (31).

       Curricular content. When detailing what the specific content foci of kindergarten classrooms should be, the developmentalists and academic advocates differ slightly in their emphasis on subjects, but stress the same general principles. Both groups argue that early learning environments should expose children to rich content, from a range of disciplines; however, academic advocates also stress the importance of academic content more often than the developmentalists.

In terms of early literacy skills, for example, developmentalists emphasize exposure to content over skill acquisition:

> The child takes a playful approach to written language, pretending to write and read, and is able to recognize some words but without great consistency. Many cannot yet recognize or write all the letters of the alphabet with accuracy and consistency. Of great importance is that the child has a growing awareness of print literacy and feels comfortable with it. Like first becoming comfortable with water and then learning to swim, it is much easier for a child to become an early reader if he has enjoyed being an emerging one and feels confident with his growing skills (1).

This is consistent with the general view of school readiness for the developmentalists, where the focus is not on "tooling up" with a certain set of skills, but rather helping students become familiar with school and foster a positive association with it (1; 15).

Academic advocates have higher expectations for the content taught. According to one academic advocacy organization,

> Because early experiences affect later education outcomes, providing young children with research-based mathematics and science learning opportunities is likely to pay off with increased achievement, literacy, and work skills in these critical areas (31).

Despite the focus on academics in kindergarten, the academic advocates are quick to stress that this content does not have to be presented in a dull manner. When discussing content foci in kindergarten, these organizations frequently cite ways in which academic content can be seamlessly integrated into playful classroom activities.

Assessment practices. Both developmentalists and academic advocates stress that assessment in kindergarten should be low-stakes, based on informal observation, and used primarily to drive program improvement and instructional practices. Both groups highlight the guidance of the National Research Council's 2008 report, *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How?*, as informing their positions. The following excerpt from a developmentalist's position statement highlights the expressed views for kindergarten assessment for *both* groups:

> Assessment practices:
>
> > 1. Encourage policies that protect children from undue pressure and stress and from judgments that will have a negative impact on their lives in the present and in the future.
> > 2. Promote the use of assessments that are based on observations of children, their development and learning.
> > 3. Work to ensure that classroom assessments are used for the purpose of improving instruction.
> > 4. Support efforts to eliminate testing of young children that is not intended to improve classroom practice.
> > 5. Eliminate labeling and ranking of children based on standardized tests.

Similar views regarding assessment practices are detailed in the following excerpt from an academic advocacy organization:

> Mathematics curricula and teaching practices should rest on a solid understanding of both mathematics and the development of young children. Understanding should be monitored by observation and other informal evaluations to ensure that instructional decisions are based on each child's mathematical needs (18).

In sum, through our analysis of the ways developmentalists and academic advocates frame the ideal kindergarten, or kindergarten as it should be, we find many similarities and few stark differences. The two groups are most similar in terms of their views on the proper use of assessments in kindergarten and the pedagogical approach and role of the teacher. While still similar, somewhat more distinctions exist between the organizations in terms of the overall goals and purposes of kindergarten and the specific content foci in kindergarten. As we turn from the normative goals and views of kindergarten to the reality of kindergarten and the problems associated with it, stark divisions emerge.

From Vision to Reality: Problems with Kindergarten

This section is organized around four key problems with kindergarten that were identified through our analysis. In each case, we first detail the problem narrative and then apply Stone's (1989) framework to examine the causal stories told by organizations in the publications they produce.

Systemization of kindergarten. A core narrative for developmentalists focuses on what we call the *systemization of kindergarten*—a shift towards adoption of standards and practices that are aligned with later grades and integrating kindergarten into a single "K-12" continuum. Developmentalists contend that this systemization is misguided and that kindergarten should not conform to the structure and policies prevalent in higher grades. The following excerpt from a developmentalist publication details this line of argument:

> The care and instruction of young children outside of the home, over the last half century has become a downward extension of schooling. It is now the first rung on the educational ladder. In many respects, however, this most recent addition to the pedagogical hierarchy is quite different from its elementary and secondary predecessors (1).

Further, developmentalists frequently note that kindergarten is a unique period in a child's development, one that is distinct from the later grades in education. While the academic advocates look toward the higher grades to align practices and content in kindergarten accordingly, the developmentalists argue that the reference point to guide the structure of kindergarten should be the child:

> The early childhood curriculum is the most holistic and least differentiated at any level of education. It is also the most solidly grounded in philosophy, in clearly articulated methodology, and in theory and research. Those who contributed to the discipline of early childhood education came from occupations and professions outside the academic domain. What they had in common was an understanding of children. And that is what makes early childhood education unique; it starts with the child and not with the subject matter (1).

When discussing what they call accountability "pushdown" (12; 16), developmentalists argue that these reforms were never intended to be present in the early grades. Developmentalists frequently employ a narrative that accountability, intended only for later grades, has slowly crept down into kindergarten where it is developmentally inappropriate. According to one: "*A Nation at Risk* promoted high-school standards. No one foresaw that 25 years later kindergarten education would be dictated by standards" (1).

In addition to finding evidence of a "pushdown" narrative wherein accountability pressures are spreading into kindergarten, we also found that developmentalist organizations

frequently note that preschool education too is being pulled into alignment by accountability pressures above. As the authors of one document note:

> Aligning standards for K–12 with early learning standards presents a number of challenges, including the very real potential for "push-down," where the K–12 standards may exert pressure on states to modify their oftentimes well-developed early learning standards to align with those for programs serving older children.

Going further, they argue that the early childhood standards is a model to which later grades should align:

> The early childhood field should not allow for alignment to flow only downward but should advocate for the "push-up" of early childhood standards to inform ongoing development of K–12 standards, including those in areas not part of the Common Core (25).

This line of argument draws upon what Stone (1989) would call an inadvertent cause. The notion of systemization of kindergarten and the pushdown of accountability pressure from later grades is portrayed as a negative consequence that was not intended. According to Stone's (1989) theory, this approach is not particularly effective because it does assign blame to a particular group. By framing the systemization of kindergarten as an unintended byproduct of reforms intended for higher grades, the developmentalists are missing the opportunity to cast their opponents as deliberately doing harm and positioning themselves as the group that will fix the problem.

Tying teachers' hands? Directly related to the systemization of kindergarten, developmentalists argue that the adoption of standards and rigid accountability in kindergarten have "tied teachers' hands" in terms of their instructional autonomy. Many developmentalist documents stress that kindergarten teachers know what is best for their children in terms of developmentally appropriate practice, but under extreme pressure to meet academic standards, they are unable to practice as they wish. The argument is frequently framed as a tension between teachers and administrators. For example, the authors of one document say:

> It will take time to build up a movement for play-based kindergartens. Meanwhile, many teachers want to bring play into their kindergartens but are forbidden to do so by their administrators. [....] By placing these demands in kindergarten, schools force teachers to spend most of their time trying to meet them. Teachers who recognize the gap between where their children are developmentally and what is required of them are in a difficult spot (1).

In addition to being pressured to teach in developmentally inappropriate ways, kindergarten teachers, according to developmentalists, have a difficult time taking a stand against them due to the narratives surrounding the reforms. They argue that at the surface level, these reforms are ostensibly sound and that opposing them would make them look bad. They authors of one developmentalist document notes, for example, "Many educators oppose testing of young children but don't speak out against it because they may be accused of being against rigor and 'accountability'" (4). In another, the authors say, "Those who are aware of the standards are reluctant to speak out because they are literally afraid of losing their jobs" (1).

While the majority of references to this line of argument frame kindergarten teachers as knowing what is best for children, in some cases, developmentalists suggest that kindergarten

teachers are not in fact aware of developmentally appropriate practices. In a third developmentalist document, for example, the authors argue that:

> The majority of early childhood classrooms today are driven by myriad of developmentally inappropriate standards-based tests and check lists that ignore children's needs, capacities and cultures, and do not honor their uniqueness as learners. [...] As these trends take hold there has been a dumbing down of teaching and teacher knowledge, which is being increasingly replaced by commercial scripts that can be followed mindlessly. Less prepared teachers who are more willing to follow commercial scripts and manage data are entering the field of early childhood at the same time that increasingly frustrated experienced teachers are leaving. Older mentors who once wisely guided young teachers are fast disappearing (16).

This argument is noteworthy because it suggests that as time goes on, teachers who know and value developmentally appropriate teaching practices in kindergarten will disappear and there will be few or no professionals in kindergarten to advocate for appropriate practice.

The academic advocates, too, acknowledge the potential adverse consequences of some standard-based reforms and how they may lead teachers to adopt developmentally inappropriate practices. However, they argue that the solution is not to abandon such reforms; rather, academic advocates suggest that care must be taken to implement these reforms, and when implemented correctly, they are both sound and appropriate. In response to concerns over the Common Core in kindergarten, for example, one academic advocacy organization wrote:

> We wish curriculum, and especially high-stakes assessments, would be carefully piloted with extensive research on outcomes, including unanticipated outcomes, before they are accepted and more widely disseminated (Sarama & Clements, 2015) (or rejected and not used). We wish more educators would realize what's truly developmentally inappropriate is present-day kindergarten curricula that "teach" children what they already know (Engel, Claessens, & Finch, 2013). But we do think that too many find it easier to dramatically warn of all that could go wrong working with the Common Core ("Students will be pressured!" "There are not CC curricula yet!" "The kids will fail!"). Too few take the more difficult road of building positive solutions. Let's stop biting the finger, and look where it's pointing (35).

In this case, academic advocates suggest that some teachers are resistant to reforms such as the Common Core in the early grades because of a *misguided* notion that these standards are developmentally inappropriate. In response to many concerns raised by developmentalists, the academic advocates suggest that there is a false dichotomy between academic content in kindergarten and developmentally appropriate practice. For example, trying to combat the notion that academic standards force teachers to adopt specific practices, one academic advocate notes that, "Seeing a focus on academic content tells us what children are being taught, but it does not dictate how children should be taught" (24). Academic advocates, in reference to the debate over the Common Core Standards, also note that standards are being portrayed in ways that simply support their opponents' arguments. For example:

> Perhaps the most common criticism of the Common Core State Standards-Mathematics (CCSS-M) for young children is that they are not "developmentally appropriate" (e.g., Meisels, 2011). Unfortunately, the phrase "developmentally appropriate" too often functions as a Rorschach test for whatever a person wants to see or argue against (35).

When applying Stone's causal stories framework (1989) to the *tying teachers' hands* narrative, we see that developmentalists appear to characterize problems of kindergarten as stemming from a mechanical cause while academic advocates appear to work to establish an inadvertent cause. Developmentalists suggest that standards and accountability reforms tie their hands and that teachers have no choice but to carry out the will of the reformers. In this narrative, teachers are simply acting as "automatons," carrying out the orders from above. Academic advocates seem to combat this narrative with an inadvertent cause argument. Here, the policy reforms in kindergarten are sound, and teachers adopting developmentally inappropriate practices are simply "unintended consequences of willed human action" (Stone, 2002, p. 192).

   Lies, damn lies, and statistics. Throughout the documents analyzed, both developmentalists and academic advocates frequently argue that their positions had strong support of scientific research, evoking what Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) and Cohen-Vogel and Hunt (2007) call the *evidentiary warrant.* For the developmentalists, their claims of superior evidence follow three primary patterns. In the first, they frequently argue that play-based experiential learning is directly related to later academic success. They contend that simply fostering rich play-based experiences in kindergarten, rather than direct teaching of academic content in kindergarten, will lead to later academic success. One document notes, for example, that, "Research directly links play to children's ability to master such academic content as literacy and numeracy" (1). In another, an organization notes:

> Research shows that children learn best when they have hands-on learning
> experiences, engage in structured play, experience facts within meaningful contexts,
> invent their own problems to explore and solve, and share their own solutions (15).

The second theme in the developmentalist narrative regarding research evidence is discrediting the positions of academic advocates. Developmentalists argue that research evidence not only supports their position, but also discredits the position of academic advocates, who along with politicians blatantly ignore the evidence. For example, the Alliance for Children argues:

> The crisis in early education in the US continues unabated. Policymakers persist in
> ignoring the huge discrepancy between what we know about how young children
> learn and what we actually do in preschools and kindergartens (2).

In another developmentalist document, authors note:

> In the United States there is a widespread belief that teaching children to read early
> — in kindergarten or even prekindergarten — will help them be better readers in the
> long-run. Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence that this is so. How then did
> this idea take hold so strongly (12)?

A third theme in the developmentalists construction of the evidentiary warrant focuses on the Common Core Standards for early grades. In numerous documents, developmentalists suggest that the developers of the Common Core ignored the relevant research:

> We could find no research cited by the developers of the CCSS to support this
> reading standard for kindergarten. In fact, the current CCSS website, which attempts
> to address many of the criticisms of the standards and tries to make the hidden
> process of development more transparent, only cites "scholarly research" and states
> that all standards are "evidence- and research-based" (12).

Further, they argue that researchers and advocates for "developmentally appropriate kindergarten" were not even afforded a seat at the table while the standards were being developed:

> A question I would like to pose before concluding is: Why did the authors of the CCSS not consider the large body of data available from research? It is obvious to any teacher of children in grades K-3 that the standards discussed above are too hard for most children. Ravitch (2014) said, "The makeup of the work group (who wrote the Standards) helps to explain why so many people in the field of early childhood education find the CCSS to be developmentally inappropriate. There was literally no one on the writing committee (with one possible exception) with any knowledge of how very young children learn." (13)

Academic advocates also evoke an evidentiary warrant, claiming that the research evidence supports their position, although it is much less prominent in their arguments. In many cases, academic advocates use of the warrant came in response to developmentalists. For example, in a publication highlighting "myths versus facts" of the Common Core Standards, authors from Student Achievement Partners, an academic advocacy organization, state:

> Myth: Common Core ignores research about early childhood education.
> Fact: The Common Core is grounded in early childhood research – much more so than previous state standards. Research on early learning strongly informed the development of the Standards. One important source was the 2009 report, Mathematics Learning in Early Childhood: Paths Toward Excellence and Equity, developed by the National Research Council's Committee on Early Childhood Mathematics (20).

When held up against the causal stories framework, the *Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics* narrative employed by developmentalists exemplifies what Stone (1989) would call an intentional cause. This type of causal story casts opponents as intending both the cause and effect. In other words, academic advocates are, according to this narrative, knowingly doing harm. According to Stone, this approach is particularly efficacious because it clearly identifies a "villain" who is willingly doing harm. By identifying a certain group as causing the problem, it helps set the stage for others to become the "fixers" of a particular problem (Stone, 2002, p. 191).

Complex causes. In a number of developmentalist documents, organizations characterize the problems with kindergarten as complex, and argue that schools cannot be held solely responsible. In an example of what Stone (2002) terms a complex cause, the authors of one such document say:

> Ignored by our current education policies are the facts that one in four American children lives below the poverty line and a growing number are homeless, without regular access to food or healthcare, and stressed by violence and drug abuse around them. Educators now spend a great deal of their time trying to help children and families in their care manage these issues, while they also seek to close skill gaps and promote learning (12).

In another example of complex cause, developmentalists note:

> The adoption of CCSS falsely implies that making children learn these standards will combat the impact of poverty on development and learning, and create equal educational opportunity for all children. The US is the wealthiest nation in the world and has the highest child poverty rate among industrialized nations. Corporate-style

reformers would have us believe that we can solve the problem of poverty by mandating the teaching of basic skills in our nation's schools. But schools cannot solve all of the problems created by societal factors that exist outside of school walls (17).

Stone (1989) argues that complex cause narratives are not a particularly effective strategy. Stone (2002) notes that, "In politics, ironically, models of complex cause often function like accidental or natural cause. They postulate a kind of innocence, because no identifiable actor can exert control over the whole system or web of interactions. Without overarching control, there can be no purpose—and no responsibility" (p. 196). Notably, we did not find evidence in any of the academic advocate documents of complex causes. This may be because it is the developmentalists who are focused on framing recent policy changes in early-grade education as misguided and ignoring broader and more-complex issues.

Discussion

In this paper, our goal was to examine the ways policy organizations engaged in the debate over kindergarten framed their views for kindergarten *as it should be* and *as it is*. To summarize, we find that, when discussing their vision for kindergarten as it should be, developmentalists and academic advocates share similar goals and views. However, when we analyze the ways the two agendas discuss kindergarten as it is, clear divisions emerge. The agendas use different types of causal narratives to describe the problems with kindergarten and how it got that way. Developmentalists use a myriad of different causal stories—mechanical, inadvertent, intentional and complex— as they describe the failings of today's kindergarten and offer policy solutions. They problematize the integration of kindergarten into the system of schooling as well as what that systematization has meant in the context of recent standards and accountability reforms, for example. Academic advocates counter that, when properly implemented, system integration and content and performance standards in kindergarten are not problems and instead part of the solution for improving educational outcomes for all students. In this section, we discuss our key findings in relation to the existing literature, implications of these findings, as well as study limitations and directions for future research.

The similarities between developmentalists and academic advocates regarding their visions for kindergarten surprised us. Through our analysis of documents produced by these organizations and guided by Russell's (2011) framework for the logics of instruction in kindergarten, we find few differences regarding kindergarten as it should be in terms of its goals and purposes, pedagogical approaches and teacher roles, curricular content, and assessment practices. In fact, based on our analysis, both agendas, according to Russell's (2011) framework, would be characterized as holding a "developmental logic of instruction." The primary reason why academic advocates do not fit Russell's "academic logic of instruction" is that they strongly, even emphatically push against the notion of a false dichotomy between the two. While academic advocates do push for more academic content in kindergarten, they argue that such content can be taught in developmentally appropriate ways that includes playful, child-centered investigation and eschew didactic and rote instruction.

Given this finding, a more granular framework that allows for more of a *continuum* between the two logics of instruction would prove useful. Indeed, the framework as it exists does not capture the distinct and granular differences that *do exist* between the different types of organizations. That said, Russell's (2011) framework as it exists may be appropriate for other purposes, such as studying actual classroom instructional practices in kindergarten.

Similarities waned as our analysis turned to how these organizations discuss kindergarten as it is. The narratives surrounding the problems with kindergarten were driven by developmentalists, who see recent policy reforms as having detrimental effects on children in early grades. Indeed, instead of problematizing today's kindergarten per se, academic advocates were largely responding to developmentalists' concerns. Three central narratives emerged in the language used by developmentalists to problematize kindergarten. The first, *systemization of kindergarten*, focuses on how standard and accountability reforms targeted for the upper grades have altered kindergarten in developmentally inappropriate ways. The second, *tying teachers' hands,* focuses on how standards and accountability reforms tie teachers' hands and that they have no choice but to carry out the will of the reformers. In the third, *lies, damn lies, and statistics,* the developmentalists contend that academic advocates and politicians are willfully ignoring the wealth of research evidence that supports the developmentalists' agenda.

In constructing these narratives, the developmentalists relied on a number of different causal story types, including mechanical cause, intentional cause, and complex cause. In response, the academic advocates often relied on an inadvertent cause strategy, attempting to deflect blame for unintended negative side effects. When arraying the use of story types with Stone's (2002) conception of the efficacy of alternative approaches, we find mixed evidence. On the one hand, use of the intentional cause narrative by the developmentalists may be particularly effective because it lays blame directly at the feet of the academic advocates. On the other hand, use of the mechanical, inadvertent, and complex cause narratives are theorized to be ineffective because they do not provide a direct target or actor to blame for the problem. Given these conceptions of which strategies are effective, it is only the developmentalists who employ an effective strategy, but both developmentalists and academic advocates framed their arguments in ways that Stone (2002) sees as unlikely to be effective. It is important to note, however, that the relative efficacy of different causal narratives is only theoretically based at the present time.

Limitations and future research. Future research should address a number of limitations of the current study. First, our analysis focuses only on documents produced by policy organizations engaged in this debate. Policy organizations are but one component of a complex network of institutions shaping the public discourse over kindergarten. Future research should extend the analysis to consider the contributions of institutions, including the media and the state. Leveraging a common framework, such as Russell's (2011), would help to build understanding of how the framing of kindergarten varies across different actor types.

Second, while Stone's causal stories framework, applied to our data, allowed us to classify the types of stories used by agenda advocates, we do not know whether the types of stories as they are constructed and advanced here are more or less effective in terms of policy outcomes. Future research should focus on the extent to which different types of stories may lead to policy adoption in early childhood education and in what contexts. Further, other frameworks could be employed to characterize the discourses. Other frameworks might draw more attention to the use of metaphor and/or allegory, for example, or to the types of warrants used by actors on both sides of the debate (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2002; Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007). It is possible that these lenses will reveal differences between the agendas' arguments that our study did not.

Finally, technologies like exploratory factor analysis and text coherence analysis are allowing for new, more efficient ways to code textual data (Foltz et al., 1998; Landauer et al., 1998). Future research might employ these new approaches, not only to compare the results with the findings reported here, but also to conduct a more-nuanced, word-level analysis to reveal the ways particular words and phrases are coupled by agenda advocates as they build their narratives and push their views.

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Appendix A: Key Documents Analyzed

	Policy Organization	Title	Document Type	Source
1	Alliance for Childhood	Crisis in Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School	Issue Brief	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/kindergarten_report.pdf
2	Alliance for Childhood	The Crisis in Early Education: A Research-Based Case for More Play and Less Pressure	Issue Brief	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/crisis_in_early_ed.pdf
3	Alliance for Childhood	The Loss of Children's Play: A Public Health Issue	Issue Brief	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/Health_brief.pdf
4	Alliance for Childhood	Tips for Parents: When Kindergarten Testing is Out of Hand	Issue Brief	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/tips_on_testing.pdf
5	Alliance for Childhood	Common Core Standards: Why we object to the K-3 Core Standards	Position Statement	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/standards
6	Alliance for Childhood	A Call to Action on the Education of Young Children	Position Statement	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/pdf/pdf_files/Call_to_Action_on_Young_Children.pdf
7	Alliance for Childhood	Children from Birth to Five: Academics Versus Play	Position Statement	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/position_statements
8	Alliance for Childhood	Experiential Learning and Play in Pre-K and Kindergarten	Issue Brief	http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/PolicyBrief2.pdf
9	American Association of Pediatrics	The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds	Issue Brief	http://www2.aap.org/pressroom/playfinal.pdf
10	American Association of Pediatrics	School Readiness	Technical Report	http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/121/4/e1008.full.pdf+html?sid=2270e6ab-50d1-4ab4-9563-64eb7c6606e4
11	American Association of Pediatrics	The Crucial Role of Recess in School	Position Statement	http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/1/183
12	Defending the Early Years	Reading Instruction in Kindergarten: Little to Gain and Much to Lose	Issue Brief	http://deyproject.org/2015/01/13/our-new-report-reading-instruction-in-kindergarten-little-to-gain-and-much-to-lose/
13	Defending the Early Years	Selected Standards from the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics, Grades K-3: My Reasons for not Supporting Them	Issue Brief	https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/kamiideyccssmathpaper.pdf
14	Defending the Early Years	Lively Minds: Distinctions between academic versus intellectual goals for young children	Issue Brief	https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/dey-lively-minds-4-8-15.pdf
15	Defending the Early Years	Position Statement on Standards and Testing for Young Children	Position Statement	https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/position-paper-standards-and-testing-for-young-children.pdf

16	Defending the Early Years	Platform for Early Childhood Education	Position Statement	https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/dey-early-childhood-platform-for-save-our-schools-august-2012.pdf
17	Defending the Early Years	Six Reasons to Reject CCSS for Grades K-3	Advocate Materials	https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/common-core-stand-alone-document-final-final-1.pdf
18	National Council of Teachers of Mathematics	Why is mathematics important for early childhood learners?	Position Statement	http://www.nctm.org/Standards-and-Positions/Position-Statements/Mathematics-in-Early-Childhood-Learning/
19	National Council of Teachers of Mathematics	A Missed Opportunity: Mathematics in Early Childhood	President's Message	http://www.nctm.org/News-and-Calendar/Messages-from-the-President/Archive/Henry-(Hank)-Kepner,-Jr/A-Missed-Opportunity_-Mathematics-in-Early-Childhood/
20	Student Achievement Partners	The Developmental Appropriateness of the CCSS	Issue Brief	http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Developmental%20Appropriateness%20Math.pdf
21	Student Achievement Partners	What Common Core State Standards Say (and DON'T Say) about Kindergarten	Issue Brief	http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/What%20Common%20Core%20State%20Standards%20Say%20(and%20DON'T%20Say)%20about%20Kindergarten.pdf
22	National Association of Elementary School Principals	Speaking Out: Balancing Preschool, Academic Rigor	Blog Post	http://www.naesp.org/principal-mayjune-2013-achievement-gap/speaking-out-balancing-preschool-academic-rigor
23	National Association of Elementary School Principals	Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities: Competencies for Effective Principal Practice	Competency Guide	http://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/leading-pre-k-3-learning-communities-executive-summary.pdf
24	National Association for the Education of Young Children	Not Yesterday's Kindergarten	Blog Post	http://www.naeyc.org/blogs/gclarke/2014/02/not-yesterday's-kindergarten
25	National Association for the Education of Young Children	The Common Core State Standards: Caution and Opportunity for Early Childhood Education	Position Statement	http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/11_CommonCore1_2A_rv2.pdf
26	National Association for the Education of Young Children	Variation in Children's Experience of Kindergarten and the Common Core	Issue Brief	http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/CommonCore_KVariation.pdf
27	National Association for the Education of Young Children	Helping Other Understand Academic Rigor in Teachers' Developmentally Appropriate Practices	Young Children Journal Article	http://www.naeyc.org/yc/article/academic-rigor-in-dap
28	National Association for the Education	The Common Core State Standards and Developmentally Appropriate Practices: Creating	Issue Brief	http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/image/public_policy/Focus%20Kinder_chapter5_copyright_RS%20(3).pdf

	of Young Children	a Relationship		
29	National Association for the Education of Young Children	Joint Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education on the Common Core Standards Initiative Related to Kindergarten through Third Grade	Position Statement	http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/policy/NAEYC-NAECS-SDE-Core-Standards-Statement.pdf
30	National Institute for Early Education Research	Play, Mathematics, and False Dichotomies	Blog Post	http://preschoolmatters.org/2014/03/03/play-mathematics-and-false-dichotomies/
31	National Institute for Early Education Research	Math and Science in Preschool: Policies and Practices	Issue Brief	http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/20.pdf
32	National Institute for Early Education Research	Preschool Curriculum Decision-Making: Dimensions to Consider	Issue Brief	http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/12.pdf
33	National Institute for Early Education Research	Child Outcome Standards in Pre-K Programs	Issue Brief	http://nieer.org/publications/policy-matters-policy-briefs/policy-brief-child-outcome-standards-pre-k-programs
34	National Institute for Early Education Research	Prepared for Kindergarten: What Does "Readiness" Mean?	Issue Brief	http://nieer.org/resources/policyreports/report5.pdf
35	National Institute for Early Education Research	What is Developmentally Appropriate Math?	Blog Post	http://preschoolmatters.org/2015/04/15/what-is-developmentally-appropriate-math/
36	National Institute for Early Education Research	Why CCSS-M Grades K-3 is developmentally appropriate and internationally competitive	Blog Post	http://preschoolmatters.org/2015/04/13/why-ccss-m-grades-k-3-is-developmentally-appropriate-and-internationally-competitive/
37	National Institute for Early Education Research	The Common Core State Standards in early childhood education: summary	Blog Post	http://preschoolmatters.org/2015/04/23/clarity-on-the-common-core-state-standards-in-early-childhood-education/
38	National Institute for Early Education Research	The CCSS don't say we should exclude the play	Blog Post	http://preschoolmatters.org/2015/03/30/the-ccss-dont-say-we-should-exclude-the-play/
39	National Institute for Early Education Research	Playful learning: Where a rich curriculum meets a playful pedagogy	Blog Post	http://preschoolmatters.org/page/2/?s=developmentally+appropriate

Appendix B: Survey Forms

(Survey Version-A)

Introduction

We aim to position policy organizations/actors in the debate over the changing nature of early childhood education as *developmentalists*, on the one hand, or *academic advocates*, on the other.

For our purposes here, we define developmentalists as those who argue that early childhood education should primarily support children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Developmentalists believe the purpose of early childhood education is to help students transition into school, with a focus on developing skills and behaviors necessary for future learning. According to this view, there is exposure to academic content, though there are no predetermined standards of skills required for school entry.

According to our definition, academic advocates argue that early childhood education should emphasize academic skills and content. Academic advocates believe the purpose of early childhood education is to ensure that students have certain behaviors and skills that they argue are required at school entry.

These definitions present two competing, though not mutually exclusive, views of early childhood education. We relied on Russell's (2011) framework of developmental and academic logics of instruction to create our definitions.

—

Citation: Russell, J. L. (2011). From child's garden to academic press: The role of shifting institutional logics in redefining kindergarten education. *American Educational Research Journal, 48*(2), 236-267.

Instructions

For each of the organizations listed below, please select one of the following response options:

1. Primarily Developmentalist
2. Primarily Academic Advocate
3. Neither
4. I don't know

Organizations

- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- Alliance for Childhood
- Defending the Early Years
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics
- Student Achievement Partners
- Foundation for Child Development
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Institute for Early Education Research

(Survey Version-B)

Introduction
We aim to position policy organizations/actors in the debate over the changing nature of early childhood education as *developmentalists*, on the one hand, or *academic advocates*, on the other.

For our purposes here, we define developmentalists as those who argue that early childhood education should primarily support children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Developmentalists believe the purpose of early childhood education is to help students transition into school, with a focus on developing skills and behaviors necessary for future learning. According to this view, there is exposure to academic content, though there are no predetermined standards of skills required for school entry.

According to our definition, academic advocates argue that early childhood education should emphasize academic skills and content. Academic advocates believe the purpose of early childhood education is to ensure that students have certain behaviors and skills that they argue are required at school entry.

These definitions present two competing, though not mutually exclusive, views of early childhood education. We relied on Russell's (2011) framework of developmental and academic logics of instruction to create our definitions.

—
Citation: Russell, J. L. (2011). From child's garden to academic press: The role of shifting institutional logics in redefining kindergarten education. *American Educational Research Journal, 48*(2), 236-267.

Instructions

Please list organizations that you feel fit primarily into each group below. You will also have the opportunity to list additional organizations whose positions as developmentalists or academic advocates are unclear or you may not know.

Organizations that you would consider to be primarily *developmentalists*.
[Text Box]

Organizations that you would consider to be primarily *academic advocates*.
[Text Box]

Organizations that are involved in the discussion, but you are unsure how to categorize them.
[Text Box]

Thank you so much for completing this survey!

Appendix C: Coding Scheme

A Priori Codes:

<u>Russell (2011) Framework</u>
- Goals and Purposes
- Content Coverage
- Assessment Practices
- Pedagogical Approach and Teacher Role

<u>Stone's (1989) Causal Stories Framework</u>
- Problem Definition
    - Inadvertent Cause
    - Accidental Cause
    - Mechanical Cause
    - Intentional Cause
    - Complex Cause

Emergent Codes:

- Accountability
- Common Core State Standards
- Dichotomy
- Evidentiary Warrant
- Pushdown/Alignment

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