Reimagining KINDERGARTEN

Restoring a developmental approach when accountability demands are pushing formal instruction on the youngest learners

BY ELIZABETH GRAUE

Reading titles such as "Kindergrind" (*Time*, 1999), "What Happened to Kindergarten?" (*Instructor*, 2007) and "Kindergarten Cram" (*New York Times Magazine*, 2009) in national periodicals, you would think kindergarten is one scary place. Has kindergarten lost its identity as the kinder, gentler part of the K-12 system?

For 150 years we've argued about what kindergarten should look like. Should it be a place to assimilate new immigrants or should it enrich the experience of middle-class children? Should it focus on the arts, health and hygiene or the 3 R's?

Until recently, kindergarten was the first year of formal schooling for most children. Kindergarten was a transition between home and school, focused on a child separating from a stay-at-home mom, understanding how to be part of a group and learning to raise one's hand. Kindergarten programs were designed for children who needed concrete activities, close to their own experiences. A housekeeping corner was an extension of homes (or the homes we hoped they had). It might turn into a post office in February for Valentine's Day. Trips to the apple orchard in the fall and hatching chicks in the spring provided attention to the seasons and the natural world.

The traditional kindergarten program often reflected a rich but generic approach with creative contexts for typical kindergartners organized around materials (manipulatives or dramatic play) or a developmental area (fine motor or language).

The purpose of kindergarten reflected beliefs about how children learn, specialized training for kindergarten teachers and the degree to which women worked outside the home. Noisy, messy, playful — kindergarten was all the things we associate with young children. This special status held kindergarten apart as a place in between, not quite home and not quite school. It specialized in valuing children in the here and now, focused on supporting children's interests and skills.

Changing Culture

But we know that schools reflect the outside world, and the world has changed. In 1950, only 21 percent of 5-year-olds attended kindergarten; now it is nearly 100 percent. During the same time period, the number of women of childbearing age in the workforce exploded from about one-third to about three-fourths of all workers. In 1970, few 4-year-olds went to school (16 percent); now two out of three of them do.

In this context, many parents see play-based kindergartens as a retread of preschool. Will their children be left behind if they are not reading chapter books when they are 6? Many administrators see less formal kindergarten

activities as wasting valuable instructional time that could raise student achievement. The prevailing feeling is that children can play at home.

The value of learning through play was emphasized in yesterday's kindergarten, but the value of what was learned became less clear as the rest of the elementary curriculum was clarified through standards and curriculum alignment. Today's kindergarten is more focused on literacy and numeracy.

In full-day programs, children spend 4-6 times as much time on reading and math activities as they do in play. To ensure these pupils perform well on accountability tests, kindergarteners spend between 20 and 30 minutes a day on test preparation. Rather than learning to tie shoes, we expect kindergartners to learn to read. The housekeeping corner is now a writing center, and few kindergarten teachers have enough creative play materials for all the students. Concern about academic standards often crowds out attention to social development. The public perception is that kindergarten is what 1st grade used to be.

While high-stakes accountability tests implemented in later grades have increased the pressure on kindergarten, changes have been brewing since the 1970s. These adaptations represent many forces and their effects have been turbocharged in the environment of No Child Left Behind.

Recalibrating Programs

More children attend preschool programs, but increasing numbers of teachers say their students are not prepared for the rigors of kindergarten's new structure. They complain many children do not have appropriate social skills, lack basic knowledge of language and seem to have spent five years in front of a video game.

Today's kindergarten children are caught in a triple bind — they have more formal schooling but less time to explore, practice social skills or build relationships with peers and adults. The expectations they face in kindergarten are steep, pitched at what was once seen as 1st grade.

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And despite all this change around them, kindergartners are young children whose needs are distinctly different from their older school peers.

I worry we have overshot the mark. It seems expectations have evolved without a clear sense of purpose or of the needs of the children. At the risk of being called an old fogey, I'd say we have done a rotten job of articulating what kindergarten should look like and why. The current focus on benchmarks and achievement has been so clear and persuasive. It has trumped attention to more developmental views and has focused effort on what is tested rather than on what is learned.

Even when testing doesn't occur until 3rd grade, the back mapping of expectations from the test to kindergarten has warped our practice. Yes, it has aligned academic expectations in important ways, but it has distorted the goals and practice of instruction. Kindergarten now is built on a model of content rather than on the needs of children. Just look at a kindergarten schedule. It is segmented into reading, math, science (well, maybe once or twice a month). Play, which once served as the core of kindergarten, is pushed out to ensure each classroom has accomplished the required numbers of minutes of content per week. It does not make sense to squeeze the life out of kindergarten to cram the content required by the state's 3rd-grade test.

A metaphor illustrates the problem. Several ways exist for planning a trip. One way is to find a destination and get there as quickly as possible. The trip is all about *being there*, not *getting there*. It puts the race ahead of the journey. This is what happens when kindergarten's purpose and design are dictated by the needs of later grades.

Alternatively, you can think in terms of your travel route, taking your time along the way, enjoying the journey as much as the endpoint. You have to learn how to travel and how to get along with your travel companions. While it wouldn't make sense to ignore your progress to the ultimate destination, driving at breakneck speed and not stopping for a break would probably mean you'd miss some really great experiences along the way. This is particularly true when the car is full of 5-year-olds.

Kindergarten is more than a pass-through to 3rd grade. Even if we think in terms of more proximal measures, we should have higher aspirations for kindergarten than preparation for 1st grade. It is valuable in and of itself. It is worth taking the time to see all that kindergarten has to offer, planning a careful educational journey that is designed by someone who knows the terrain.

A Delicate Balance

Kindergarten should be seen as the foundation but not merely a prerequisite to later learning. It develops child capacity by conceptualizing them as learners today, building on the experiences they bring while being mindful of where they hope to go in the future. It requires a delicate balance — the program must look backward, forward and in the present simultaneously. That would mean the purpose of kindergarten is to build on children's experiences, needs and interests in a way that will enhance all domains of development and that is aligned with expectations in later grades.

First and foremost, the curriculum should be designed to captivate 5- and 6-year-olds. Children of kindergarten age are eager learners and the kindergarten programming should capitalize on that enthusiasm. Anything else is a waste of time. For this reason, kindergarten should be

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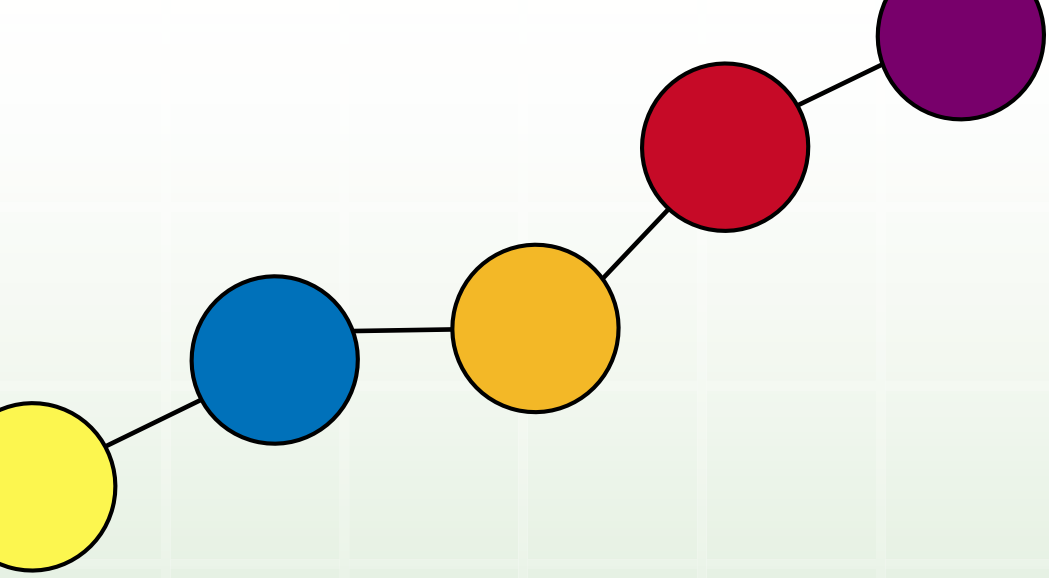

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responsive to the general developmental needs of the children in kindergarten, not 1st grade.

A kindergarten is an active place, with children engaged in a variety of real activities (not just worksheets or passive reading). It vacillates between the noise of learning (blocks falling, negotiation over materials, acting out stories) and the quiet of concentration (assembling a puzzle, solving a problem, aligning ramps for boats to move in the water table), between structured activities led by the teacher and those chosen by the students.

The curriculum should fit every child who is legally eligible for attendance. All children are ready to learn; kindergartens set the context. A telling indicator the kindergarten is out of balance is an increase in the numbers of (a) parents who delay kindergarten entrance, (b) kindergarten retentions and/or (c) children referred for testing. Each signals the program is out of sync, pushing certain children out.

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These "solutions" are not evidence-based and often are applied in biased ways, involving children who are boys, poor, and with brown or black skin. Rigorous programs should be inclusive, requiring curricular resources that do not require sorting into ready and unready groups. Kindergarten should not put children at risk.

High-quality kindergarten practice provides flexible instructional approaches with a planned set of content to help students grow across developmental domains. This program supports the child who talks and sings, who writes and races, who solves and causes problems, who makes and needs friends. A program that can enrich all these dimensions is complex. The curriculum design includes the traditional content areas of reading, language arts, math, science, social studies and the arts, as well as physical and social emotional development. It engages children in activity types, including large and small groups, teacher-directed and child-initiated, individual and peer-oriented, formal and informal. Balancing all these elements is difficult but critical if we hope to have balanced students.

The last decade has produced a laser-like focus on reading and math and that is insufficient for the growing kindergarten student. A high-quality program is a hybrid of yesterday's and today's kindergarten. From the traditional kindergarten, it should take our knowledge of how children develop across all domains and apply that knowledge in diverse activities. From today's version, it uses the research on how children learn content and the role of teachers in enhancing that learning. This hybrid is developmentally and instructionally responsive, working from a sense of where the students are, what they need and where they are going.

Divergent Approaches

Let me provide a contrast. Miss Morton is a confident second-year kindergarten teacher. In her classroom, learning centers are designed around the report card performance standards. Assessment is wedged into any spare moment and she knows everyone's reading level.

Missing from her room, however, are elements of strong kindergarten practice. There are no easels, unit blocks or sand/water table — virtually all materials are connected to literacy and math. Free play is not *really* free; all materials are teacher-chosen during the pupils' 20 minutes of free play per week. In this data-driven program, teacher knowledge generated through careful observation has been pushed out by formal tools. Miss Morton knows little about her students' families and can't build on their expertise.

In contrast, across town Mrs. Horton-Gray's room hums with children learning. Mrs. Horton-Gray is expert in the school district's balanced literacy and math curricula, and children have many opportunities to build that knowledge. Children have the quirky knack of bringing the curriculum into their play, and the teacher is always there to capitalize on an unexpected teaching opportunity. She has trained some volunteers to do basic assessment tasks so she can be fully present to learn from the children during both formal and informal activities.

Mrs. Horton-Gray's classroom has a sacrosanct hour of free play each day right after lunch, and she engages in play and observes interactions. This gives her highly contextualized information about her students. She writes school-to-home journals for each child and spends her lunch period reading what families write back to her. Mrs. Horton-Gray's program is balanced and clear about all learning goals, modeling the clarity that has been developed in literacy and math. This requires an innovative twist on standards and benchmarks. Kindergarten goals, while clear, can't be childproof. They should reflect the massive variation in young students' developmental rates and levels. They also include the curriculum map encountered later in students' educational journey.

Good kindergarten teachers are mindful in their practice. They know their students well, are attuned to their needs as individuals and a group. Children will not get the same thing from each activity, and they will not arrive at the same point by the end of the year. Kindergarten teachers need a commitment to problem solving that supports any rate of development and tools for the task.

This leads to the one all-purpose tool of kindergarten.

Reinvigorating Play

Formerly the heart of the kindergarten experience, play has been abandoned in increasing numbers of kindergartens to focus on what is seen as learning. This is especially worrisome when you read in the *Archives of Pediatrics*

and Adolescent Medicine that free play shrank 25 percent between 1981 and 1997. Children have fewer chances to play outside of school and less time in school.

While I could argue endlessly why that is a huge mistake, let's just say that play, when choreographed thoughtfully, is one of the most powerful learning contexts available. In the hands of a skilled kindergarten teacher, play is a rich laboratory that can be used to teach multiple concepts simultaneously in a way that differentiates instruction. Two kinds of play are useful in kindergarten — free play initiated by children and teacher-initiated learning experiences guided by an adult. Through its less formal structure, play provides children with chances (1) to choose their own level of challenge and (2) to be stretched by others in a low-stress opportunity. This is truly differentiation in action.

What's required is someone who values play and can share control with children. Equally important is the ability to set the stage for meaningful play that has authentic intellectual content. Finally, it requires teachers to take an active role in scaffolding play. This does not mean they direct play. Instead they enrich interactions by providing quality feedback, extending conversations and bringing in relevant resources.

Unfortunately, many teachers use playtime to assess children or organize the next activity. From an instructional perspective, this is a big mistake, missing rich opportunities to do informal assessment and to add to the learning value of play. In addition to the real human element, teachers can strengthen the richness of play activities by intentionally looking for learning opportunities. Play can range from open-ended periods indoors and out to choices of activities thoughtfully designed by teachers. This play is seeded with materials that promote learning across academic and social domains.

In some cases, this is a matter of making visible the content deeply embedded, like the physics and social negotiation learned in block play. In other cases, it entails carefully planting materials that enrich play, like turning the dramatic play area into a pharmacy that requires reading prescriptions and counting out pretend medications.

Play also can come in semi-structured contexts, as when teachers develop content-focused activity centers that teach and reinforce particular concepts. Open-ended and semi-structured activities, while both potentially valuable for learning, are different experiences, and both are necessary in a balanced kindergarten.

Special Learning

Kindergarten teachers need training that prepares them for this special learning environment. The skills and knowledge needed to teach a rich kindergarten program is not developed by chance. Good kindergarten teachers understand the psychological, physical and cultural dimensions of child development. This knowledge helps them know what is typical for this age group and how these patterns are shaped by cultural opportunities.

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Teachers also implement design principles to create an environment that addresses the unique needs of 5- and 6-year-olds. This helps them to organize a classroom environment and activities that manage behavior and provide an array of approaches to learning.

Finally, kindergarten teachers need deep knowledge of content across domains. This content knowledge helps them set instructional goals for their students. They need all of this plus the typical virtues ascribed to kindergarten teachers — patience, good humor and a love of children.

High-caliber kindergartens need educated administrators. Kindergarten-savvy leaders get it — they understand the unique learning opportunities available in a kindergarten context. Their job is to support these opportunities through capacity building, ensuring kindergarten staff have the education and resources to do the job. It also will require them to support inclusion of sustained child-initiated activities (inside the classroom and on the playground) in every kindergarten classroom daily.

To this end, I offer a challenge. Tomorrow, next week, next month, identify an outstanding kindergarten teacher and spend some time in her or his classroom. Study the art and science of excellent kindergarten teaching. Learn to articulate what is happening and why. Then become a kindergarten advocate. ■

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