

The Case for the New Kindergarten: Challenging and Playful

By Daphna Bassok, Amy Claessens, and Mimi Engel

Kindergarten in the United States is not what it used to be. For one thing, it's longer. In 1998, only about 56 percent of children attended full-day kindergarten. Today, that figure is 80 percent, [according to our research](#).

Kindergarten classrooms are also far more academically oriented. Our research [shows](#) that most kindergarten teachers now think academic instruction should begin in preschool and indicate that it's important for incoming kindergartners to already know their letters and numbers. Today's kindergarten teachers are spending much more time on literacy and expect their students to learn to read before 1st grade. The implications of these changes are not clear.

Recent accounts of these new norms have been decidedly negative, [describing a "crisis in the kindergarten,"](#) with anecdotes about experienced kindergarten teachers opting to resign rather than adapt to what they see as highly inappropriate expectations.

Education Week's [news coverage](#) of our research on the nature and role of academic instruction in early-childhood classrooms has garnered a similar response. We have heard from parents whose kindergartners are experiencing anxiety around testing, and from kindergarten teachers stretched to capacity trying to meet numerous academic goals and alarmed by the shift away from play.

We are sympathetic to and share many of the same concerns. In particular, we are troubled by the decline we have documented in the amount of time kindergartners spend on physical education, art, music, science, and social studies. We think these trends suggest that young children are being shortchanged with regard to what most of us believe are key aspects of learning.

At the same time, we are concerned by the vehemence with which many educators, researchers, and parents condemn exposure to academic content in kindergarten. Academic instruction in early-childhood classrooms is often framed as inherently at odds with "child-centered," "developmentally appropriate," or "play-based" practices. This presumed dichotomy—that preschool and kindergarten must either be geared toward play and socioemotional development or focused on rigorous academic instruction—is false.

Engaging and challenging academic instruction should (and can) be developmentally appropriate, and it does not have to be overwhelming, stressful, or boring. It does not have to supplant play or child-

initiated activities. And it certainly does not have to involve worksheets, one-size-fits-all lessons, or an overemphasis on assessment.

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We acknowledge that the norm in many kindergarten classrooms today may be rote or shallow academic instruction, and that time on academics may be crowding out time for other critical activities. This is indeed troubling. However, the response to this concern should not center on eliminating literacy and math instruction from children's first years of schooling. Rather, we need to identify strategies to foster engaging and rich environments for learning language and numeracy. We need to meet all young children where they are, help them build on their inherent curiosity and enthusiasm, and create opportunities for authentic learning.

If, as is argued by some of the nation's top poverty scholars, schools are among the most promising means of leveling the playing field for disadvantaged children, we need to think carefully about exactly what early schooling should entail, particularly for those children for whom school represents one important pathway out of poverty.

Recent research by Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University shows that average reading and math scores of incoming kindergartners from high-income backgrounds are a full standard deviation higher than those of children from families with low incomes. The size of this gap among 5-year-olds is staggering, and reducing it will require efforts on multiple fronts. Access to instruction that is engaging, challenging, and fosters a love of learning is a key ingredient. To suggest that kindergartners should be deprived of the opportunity to engage deeply in learning literacy and numeracy is to sell them short at a crucial moment in their development.

A growing body of research has taught us about the critical role of early exposure to language and literacy for children's development. We have also documented vast differences in early exposure to language between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. There is strong support for both early-childhood parental interventions and preschool programs as strategies for narrowing these gaps. It seems only logical, then, that a strong emphasis on language, literacy, and reading during kindergarten would be another key component for reducing inequality of opportunity.

Early exposure to mathematics instruction is also important. Recent position statements of the **National Association for the Education of Young Children**, the **National Council of Teachers of Mathematics**, and the **National Mathematics Advisory Panel** argue that young children are ready to learn varied and challenging math content. Further, they emphasize that children who experience high-quality math instruction in the earliest years of school are at a distinct advantage relative to their peers.

Our own research shows that children get more out of kindergarten when teachers expose them to new and challenging academic content. We are not arguing that most kindergartners need more exposure to academic content. At the same time, exposure to academic content should not be viewed as inherently at odds with young children's healthy development.

In light of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in kindergarten across the vast majority of states, let's shift the conversation about "appropriate" early-childhood learning.

Rather than focusing on whether academic content has a place in early-childhood classrooms, let's focus on how to teach it in a way that is tailored to young learners. Let's focus on creating engaging, fun, developmentally appropriate learning experiences for all kindergartners, acknowledging the importance of embedding enriching language and numeracy experiences within those environments. It will certainly require effort, support, and flexibility, but it is an attainable goal with the potential for a powerful payoff.

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