

EDUCATION

The New Preschool Is Crushing Kids

Today's young children are working more, but they're learning less.

ERIKA CHRISTAKIS JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2016 ISSUE



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STEP INTO an American preschool classroom today and you are likely to be bombarded with what we educators call a print-rich environment, every surface festooned with alphabet charts, bar graphs, word walls, instructional posters, classroom rules, calendars, schedules, and motivational platitudes—few of which a 4-year-old can “decode,” the contemporary word for what used to be known as reading.

Because so few adults can remember the pertinent details of their own preschool or kindergarten years, it can be hard to appreciate just how much the early-education landscape has been transformed over the past two decades. The changes are not restricted to the confusing pastiche on classroom walls. Pedagogy and curricula have changed too, most recently in response to the Common Core State Standards Initiative’s kindergarten guidelines. Much greater portions of the day are now spent on what’s called “seat work” (a term that probably doesn’t need any

exposition) and a form of tightly scripted teaching known as direct instruction, formerly used mainly in the older grades, in which a teacher carefully controls the content and pacing of what a child is supposed to learn.

One study, titled “Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?,” compared kindergarten teachers’ attitudes nationwide in 1998 and 2010 and found that the percentage of teachers expecting children to know how to read by the end of the year had risen from 30 to 80 percent. The researchers also reported more time spent with workbooks and worksheets, and less time devoted to music and art. Kindergarten is indeed the new first grade, the authors concluded glumly. In turn, children who would once have used the kindergarten year as a gentle transition into school are in some cases being held back before they’ve had a chance to start. A study out of Mississippi found that in some counties, more than 10 percent of kindergartners weren’t allowed to advance to first grade.

Until recently, school-readiness skills weren’t high on anyone’s agenda, nor was the idea that the youngest learners might be disqualified from moving on to a subsequent stage. But now that kindergarten serves as a gatekeeper, not a welcome mat, to elementary school, concerns about school preparedness kick in earlier and earlier. A child who’s supposed to read by the end of kindergarten had better be getting ready in preschool. As a result, expectations that may arguably have been reasonable for 5- and 6-year-olds, such as being able to sit at a desk and complete a task using pencil and paper, are now directed at even younger children, who lack the motor skills and attention span to be successful.

Preschool classrooms have become increasingly fraught spaces, with teachers cajoling their charges to finish their “work” before they can go play. And yet, even as preschoolers are learning more pre-academic skills at earlier ages, I’ve heard many teachers say that they seem somehow—is it possible?—less inquisitive and less engaged than the kids of earlier generations. More children today seem to lack the language skills needed to retell a simple story or to use basic connecting words and prepositions. They can’t make a conceptual analogy between, say, the veins on a leaf and the veins in their own hands.

New research sounds a particularly disquieting note. A major evaluation of Tennessee’s publicly funded preschool system, published in September, found that although children who had attended preschool initially exhibited more “school

readiness” skills when they entered kindergarten than did their non-preschool-attending peers, by the time they were in first grade their attitudes toward school were deteriorating. And by second grade they performed *worse* on tests measuring literacy, language, and math skills. The researchers told *New York* magazine that overreliance on direct instruction and repetitive, poorly structured pedagogy were likely culprits; children who’d been subjected to the same insipid tasks year after year after year were understandably losing their enthusiasm for learning.

That’s right. The same educational policies that are pushing academic goals down to ever earlier levels seem to be contributing to—while at the same time obscuring—the fact that young children are gaining fewer skills, not more.

PENDULUM SHIFTS in education are as old as our republic. Steven Mintz, a historian who has written about the evolution of American childhood, describes an oscillation in the national zeitgeist between the notion of a “protected” childhood and that of a “prepared” one. Starting in the early 2000s, though, a confluence of forces began pushing preferences ever further in the direction of preparation: the increasing numbers of dual-career families scrambling to arrange child care; a new scientific focus on the cognitive potential of the early years; and concerns about growing ability gaps between well-off and disadvantaged children, which in turn fueled the trend of standards-based testing in public schools.

Preschool is a relatively recent addition to the American educational system. With a few notable exceptions, the government had a limited role in early education until the 1960s, when the federal Head Start program was founded. Before mothers entered the full-time workforce in large numbers, private preschools were likewise uncommon, and mainly served as a safe social space for children to learn to get along with others.

In the past few decades, however, we have seen a major transfer of child care and early learning from home to institution: Nearly three-quarters of American 4-year-olds are now in some kind of nonfamily care. That category spans a dizzying mix of privately and publicly funded preschool environments, including family-run day cares, private preschools in church basements, and Head Start programs in public elementary schools, to name a few. Across all of them, the distinction between early education and “official” school seems to be eroding.

When I survey parents of preschoolers, they tend to be on board with many of these changes, either because they fear that the old-fashioned pleasures of unhurried learning have no place in today's hypercompetitive world or because they simply can't find, or afford, a better option. The stress is palpable: Pick the "wrong" preschool or ease up on the phonics drills at home, and your child might not go to college. She might not be employable. She might not even be allowed to start first grade!

Media attention to the cognitive potential of early childhood has a way of exacerbating such worries, but the actual academic consensus on the components of high-quality early education tells another story. According to experts such as the Yale professor Edward Zigler, a leader in child-development and early-education policy for half a century, the best preschool programs share several features: They provide ample opportunities for young children to use and hear complex, interactive language; their curriculum supports a wide range of school-readiness goals that include social and emotional skills and active learning; they encourage meaningful family involvement; and they have knowledgeable and well-qualified teachers.

As an early-childhood educator, I've clocked many hours in many preschool classrooms, and I have found that I can pretty quickly take the temperature from the looks on kids' faces, the ratio of table space to open areas, and the amount of conversation going on in either. In a high-quality program, adults are building relationships with the children and paying close attention to their thought processes and, by extension, their communication. They're finding ways to make the children think out loud.

The real focus in the preschool years should be not just on vocabulary and reading, but on talking and listening. We forget how vital spontaneous, unstructured conversation is to young children's understanding. By talking with adults, and one another, they pick up information. They learn how things work. They solve puzzles that trouble them. Sometimes, to be fair, what children take away from a conversation is wrong. They might conclude, as my young son did, that pigs produce ham, just as chickens produce eggs and cows produce milk. But these understandings are worked over, refined, and adapted—as when a brutal older sibling explains a ham sandwich's grisly origins.

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting this type of learning. A 2011 study in the journal *Child Development* found that preschool teachers' use of sophisticated vocabulary in informal classroom settings predicted their students' reading comprehension and word knowledge in fourth grade. Unfortunately, much of the conversation in today's preschool classrooms is one-directional and simplistic, as teachers steer students through a highly structured schedule, herding them from one activity to another and signaling approval with a quick "good job!"

Consider the difference between a teacher's use of a closed statement versus an open-ended question. Imagine that a teacher approaches a child drawing a picture and exclaims, "Oh, what a pretty house!" If the child is not actually drawing a house, she might feel exposed, and even if she is drawing a house, the teacher's remark shuts down further discussion: She has labeled the thing and said she likes it. What more is there to add? A much more helpful approach would be to say, "Tell me about your drawing," inviting the child to be reflective. It's never possible to anticipate everything a small person needs to learn, so open-ended inquiry can reveal what is known and unknown. Such a small pedagogic difference can be an important catalyst for a basic, but unbounded, cognitive habit—the act of thinking out loud.

Conversation is gold. It's the most efficient early-learning system we have. And it's far more valuable than most of the reading-skills curricula we have been implementing: One meta-analysis of 13 early-childhood literacy programs "failed to find any evidence of effects on language or print-based outcomes." Take a moment to digest that devastating conclusion.

I WAS RECENTLY ASKED to review a popular preschool curriculum that comes with a big box of thematic units, including lists of words and "key concepts" that children are supposed to master. One objective of the curriculum's ocean unit, for example, is to help preschoolers understand "the importance of the ocean to the environment." Children are given a list of specific terms to learn, including *exoskeleton*, *scallop shell*, *blubber*, and *tube feet*. At first glance, this stuff seems fun and educational, but doesn't this extremely narrow articulation of "key concepts" feel a little off? What's so special about blubber, anyway? Might a young child not want to ponder bigger questions: What is water? Where do the blue and green come from? Could anything be more beautiful and more terrifying than an ocean?

The shift from an active and exploratory early-childhood pedagogy to a more scripted and instruction-based model does not involve a simple trade-off between play and work, or between joy and achievement. On the contrary, the preoccupation with accountability has led to a set of measures that favor shallow mimicry and recall behaviors, such as learning vocabulary lists and recognizing shapes and colors (something that a dog can do, by the way, but that is in fact an extraordinarily low bar for most curious 4-year-olds), while devaluing complex, integrative, and syncretic learning.

Last year, I observed some preschoolers conversing about whether snakes have bones. They argued at length among themselves, comparing the flexible serpentine body with dinosaur fossils and fish, both of which they had previously explored. There was no clear consensus on how these various creatures could contain the same hard skeletons, but I watched, transfixed, as each child added to the groundwork another had laid. The teacher gently guided the group as a captain might steer a large ship, with the tiniest nudge of the wheel. Finally, a little boy who had seen a snake skeleton in a museum became animated as he pantomimed the structure of a snake's spine in a series of karate chops: "One bone, one bone, one bone," he informed his friends. "I think we're all going to have to do a lot more research," the teacher replied, impressed. This loosely Socratic method is a perfect fit for young minds; the problem is that it doesn't conform easily to a school-readiness checklist.

The academic takeover of American early learning can be understood as a shift from what I would call an "ideas-based curriculum" to a "naming-and-labeling-based curriculum." Not coincidentally, the latter can be delivered without substantially improving our teaching force. Inexperienced or poorly supported teachers are directed to rely heavily on scripted lesson plans for a reason: We can point to a defined objective, and tell ourselves that at least kids are getting *something* this way.

But that something—while relatively cheap to provide—is awfully thin gruel. One major study of 700 preschool classrooms in 11 states found that only 15 percent showed evidence of effective interactions between teacher and child. Fifteen percent.

We neglect vital teacher-child interactions at our peril. Although the infusion of academics into preschool has been justified as a way to close the achievement gap between poor and well-off children, Robert Pianta, one of the country's leading child-policy experts, cautions that there is "no evidence whatsoever" that our early-learning system is suited to that task. He estimates that the average preschool program "narrows the achievement gap by perhaps only 5 percent," compared with the 30 to 50 percent that studies suggest would be possible with higher-quality programs. Contrasting the dismal results of Tennessee's preschool system with the more promising results in places such as Boston, which promotes active, child-centered learning (and, spends more than twice the national average on preschool), lends further credence to the idea that preschool quality really does matter.

It's become almost a cliché to look to Finland's educational system for inspiration. As has been widely reported, the country began to radically professionalize its workforce in the 1970s and abandoned most of the performance standards endemic to American schooling. Today, Finland's schools are consistently ranked among the world's very best. This "Finnish miracle" sounds almost too good to be true. Surely the country must have a few dud teachers and slacker kids!

And yet, when I've visited Finland, I've found it impossible to remain unmoved by the example of preschools where the learning environment is assessed, rather than the children in it. Having rejected many of the pseudo-academic benchmarks that can, and do, fit on a scorecard, preschool teachers in Finland are free to focus on what's really essential: their relationship with the growing child.

Here's what the Finns, who don't begin formal reading instruction until around age 7, have to say about preparing preschoolers to read: "The basis for the beginnings of literacy is that children have heard and listened ... They have spoken and been spoken to, people have discussed [things] with them ... They have asked questions and received answers."

For our littlest learners, what could be more important than that?

This article has been adapted from Erika Christakis's forthcoming book, [The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups](#).

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