

Taking Back Kindergarten: Rethinking Rigor for Young Learners



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A rigorous approach to kindergarten does not have to be at odds with developmentally appropriate education. An emphasis on the natural ways that students engage with and understand the world can not only support the development of the whole child—but ensure that kindergarten serves as a springboard toward better outcomes across the K-12 continuum.

Foreword

The shelf life of skills is shrinking. As professionals, we are acutely aware that we can no longer expect to learn technical skills today for careers that will last a lifetime. As technology advances continue to accelerate, we will all need not only to learn, but re-learn. Wash, rinse, repeat.

It is a shift that comes as no surprise to educators. Great teachers have always known that non-academic skills are essential for academic success. For students to learn to read, they first have to develop self-control and persistence. And over the last decade, K-12 schools have begun to embrace an emphasis on approaches to learning that focus on “noncognitive skills.” Upper grades are beginning to prioritize project-based—and even play-based—strategies that were once only the domain of the early childhood community.

But as the typical kindergarten curriculum has focused on core academic skills in recent years, students may have lost out on opportunities to practice and hone these noncognitive skills. And if educators do not prioritize soft skills and social–emotional skills early, then cultivating them later becomes far more challenging.

Kindergarten, after all, should establish not just a springboard for success in upper grades, but also the developmental foundation for mastery of content that is the focus of elementary, middle and high school. The approach to intentional, play-based learning envisioned in this paper reflects a whole-child educational approach that promotes academic, social–emotional, and cognitive development through guided play.

Educators have always hoped their students would become life-long learners after they graduated, but now that is even more important than ever. For that to happen, students and adults must master skills like agency, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Competencies like problem solving and resilience are ascendant and among the most valued by organizations today. Soft skills and social–emotional skills, even more so than technical capabilities, are what will enable individuals to adapt and pursue work they love.

Schools and districts can take a balanced and rigorous approach to early literacy and numeracy through experiences that tap into kindergarteners’ natural curiosity and excitement to ignite passion and inspire deeper learning. Equally important, they will equip students with essential skills that will lead to lifelong success. These skills will not have a limited shelf life. There is no expiration date on building their whole child skills. We will be serving them well.

Sandy Husk, Ph.D.

A former teacher, principal, and district leader, Sandy now serves as CEO of AVID, a national nonprofit committed to helping schools shift to a more equitable, student-centered approach.

Each year, AVID trains 70,000 educators annually to close the opportunity gap, so they can prepare all students for college, careers, and life. Sandy joined AVID Center following a career that spanned 17 years of experience implementing AVID in the three districts where she has served as superintendent, most recently in Salem-Keizer, Oregon, the second largest district in that state.

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Introduction

Young children begin their school careers having learned an incredible amount about the world, yet still needing to develop their ability to conduct themselves in a group, take part in a community, and interpret the evolving world around them.

“The vast majority of children coming into kindergarten might not have had any type of experience in a classroom setting. To go from no classroom experience at all to a highly academic kindergarten setting is very problematic,” says Frank Davidson, former superintendent of the Casa Grande Elementary School District in Arizona.

Whether they experienced preschool classes or are just entering school for the first time, kindergarten is a dramatic departure from their previous experiences. Having evolved considerably since its inception in the mid-18th century, it presents an opportunity to bring structure to children's natural curiosity as a way to support and accelerate learning. In modern kindergarten classrooms, we ask children to increase their vocabulary, learn to identify letters and numbers and, in some cases, read words and phrases by the end of the school year.

And in recent years, a growing number of schools have begun to expect even young children to sit in chairs at desks and complete worksheets.^[1]

If all this sounds rather academic for kindergartners, that is because the past few decades have brought a shift in what we ask of our youngest learners. Policy developments in K-12 have been “pushed down” to kindergarten or earlier, often resulting in something of a “first grade lite” for the early childhood set.^[2] This shift has changed everything from the types of things children are learning to the ways they are instructed—and even the amount of time children spend on learning activities.

To help students make the critical transition from pre-schooling into school, educators must match instruction with the skills children already have. But that doesn't mean removing rigorous learning from the kindergarten classroom. Quite the contrary. Superintendent George Rafferty of Mount Laurel Schools in New Jersey points out: “To an uninformed observer, a typical day of implementing best practices in developmentally appropriate curriculum and

“Guided play,” as referenced in this paper, incorporates adult scaffolding of the learning objectives and environment while allowing children to be active and engaged partners in the learning process.^[3] Guided play approaches involve collaboration between the teacher and the child. In guided play, adults are responsible for maintaining focus on learning goals, as the child guides his or her own discovery.

[1] “Giving Young Students a Bigger Slice of the Pie (Chart).” National Institute for Early Education Research, 2 Nov. 2017, nieer.org/2017/03/17/giving-young-students-bigger-slice-pie-chart.

[2] Bassok, D., Latham, S. & Korem, A. (2016). Is Kindergarten the New First Grade. AERA Open, 1(4), 1-31, DOI: 10.1177/2332858415616358 and “STILL Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement A position statement developed by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education 2000 Revision and Update Endorsed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children March 2001” <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Psunacc.pdf>

[3] Weisberg, Deena & Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy & Golinkoff, Roberta & K. Kittredge, Audrey & Klahr, David. (2016). Guided Play: Principles and Practices. Current Directions in Psychological Science. 25. 177-182. 10.1177/0963721416645512.

“The primary goal of kindergarten is assessing for discrete skills and developing a foundational readiness for learning. We need to grow kids, not stretch and tear them.”

instruction for kindergarten, with guided play and student-driven exploration, may look ‘unacademic.’ But students are developing the pre-academic skills and readiness they need to take on academic challenges in later grades.”

Thankfully, the K-12 policy landscape is shifting to embrace a more holistic approach to teaching and learning.

States, districts, and schools are embracing project-based and deeper learning activities, along with other human-centered design concepts for education that emphasize skills like persistence and problem-solving. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) attempts to provide states and school districts with the flexibility to expand classroom focus to the “whole child,” which opens the door to correcting the well-intentioned, but

ill-conceived move toward over “academicization” of kindergarten in recent years. And in what might feel like an ironic twist, the upper grades are following the lead of early childhood educators who have, for decades, emphasized the importance of aligning instruction with human development.

This paper explains the link between guided play-based learning and the development of critical skills, including executive function skills. It also explores the historical context that has led to a marginalization of play in kindergarten classrooms. It makes the case that the prioritization of developmentally appropriate, varied approaches to learning can not only support key skills development over time, but also establish a powerful foundation to improve academic outcomes.

Kindergarten is a critical place in young children’s educational experience during which emotional, cognitive, motor, and social skills must converge as they grow from curious explorers to disciplined learners. Rather than pushing back on their natural ability to approach the world as curious investigators, we can create a kindergarten experience that builds upon those skills to help them prepare socially, emotionally, and cognitively for the future. As Rick Falkenstein, Superintendent of Kingwood Township in New Jersey describes it, “The primary goal of kindergarten is assessing for discrete skills and developing a foundational readiness for learning. We need to grow kids, not stretch and tear them.”

How We Got Here

In 2016, researchers asked a question that had been brewing among parents and educators alike for more than a decade: is kindergarten the new first grade?^[4] Using two nationally representative data sets, including detailed surveys of parents, teachers, and school administrators along with direct child assessments, they compared teacher perceptions of public school kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010.

They found that kindergarten teachers in the later period held quite different academic expectations for children: Teachers reported devoting more time to advanced literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction and assessment.^[5] The percentage of teachers expecting children to know how to read by the end of the kindergarten year had risen from 30 to 80 percent.

In a school day with more time spent on “seat work” and formal pre-literacy skill development, worksheets and workbooks often come at the expense of play and project-based learning. Kindergarteners may spend less time building critical social-emotional skills like conflict resolution, leadership, and collaboration. As Vincent Costanza, a former kindergarten teacher and researcher with the National Institute for Early Education Research, and now Chief Academic Officer for Teaching Strategies, said: “What might help them demonstrate technical skills early may actually impede their ability to develop and master new skills later.”

The instrumentation of our system of education started out well-intentioned enough. Concerns about the return on War on Poverty era education

investments in equity and improvement prompted a decades-long effort to better track and quantify outcomes across K-12 schools. In some circles, the Reagan era’s seminal *A Nation at Risk*^[6] report marked the beginning of the standards and assessment movement that sowed the seeds of transformation in kindergarten classrooms.

The emerging practice of publishing student standardized test scores relative to those of other nations demonstrated that—at least on the metric of math and English assessment performance—America’s schools were falling behind.^[7]

Reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the 1970s, 80s and 90s gradually tightened the reins, culminating in President George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton’s call for standards and greater accountability, in 1989 and 1994, respectively. In 1994, Congress also set national goals for student proficiency by the year 2000—and established a process that included early steps toward academic expectations before students reached the tender age of five.

“What might help them demonstrate technical skills early may actually impede their ability to develop and master new skills later.”

[4] Bassok, D., Latham, S. & Korem, A. (2016). Is Kindergarten the New First Grade. *AERA Open*, 1(4), 1-31, DOI: 10.1177/2332858415616358

[5] “Study Snapshot: Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?” American Educational Research Association, www.aera.net/Newsroom/News-Releases-and-Statements/Study-Snapshot-Is-Kindergarten-the-New-First-Grade.

[6] “A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform. An Open Letter to the American People. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education.” <https://reagan.procon.org/sourcefiles/a-nation-at-risk-reagan-april-1983.pdf>

[7] “Conventional Schools and Their Contexts.” *What School Could Be: Insights and Inspiration from Teachers across America*, by Ted Dintersmith, Princeton University Press, 2018.

That move set the tone for expectations of the nation's kindergarteners going forward. A 1997 congressional directive established the National Reading Panel, convening researchers, educators, and parents to review the scientific literature and determine, based on that evidence, the most effective ways to teach children to read.^[8]

But it was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that ushered a fundamental shift in the federal role, requiring—for the first time—that states administer standardized tests to students in reading and math in third grade to determine if their schools were making “adequate yearly progress” in these subjects. Data would be disaggregated to ensure visibility into the performance of specific groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education programs, and poor and minority children. Schools were accountable for not just aggregate outcomes, but gaps in achievement between poor and minority students, and their more advantaged peers.

While *A Nation at Risk* planted them, NCLB-era accountability measures tended the seeds of change in kindergarten policy and practice. High stakes testing in third grade, perhaps not illogically, encouraged an emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the earlier grades. Full-day kindergarten proliferated. Among 3- to 5-year-olds attending kindergarten, the percentage attending full-day programs increased from 60 percent in 2000 to 81 percent in 2015.^[9]

The new law also committed \$1 billion to a new program, Reading First. Lawmakers authorized the program to ensure that literacy instruction was based in the sort of research enshrined by the National Reading Panel,^[10] and aimed to put an end to the protracted, decades-long debate surrounding early literacy instruction, which came to be known as the Reading Wars.^[11]



On one side of the debate, the phonics-based approach valued the dissection of words into component parts where the teacher instructs the student on proper rules and usage. On the other, the progressive whole-language approach, championed by Horace Mann and John Dewey, put words into context and encouraged children to navigate their way toward literacy with the teacher as a guiding aid. Somewhere in the middle, there was research into the science of reading, and that was leaning toward the benefits of phonics-based approaches, especially for at-risk students in the early years. While its intention was to push educators to employ research-driven strategies and curricula, in the end, Reading First was roundly criticized for, among other things, enshrining an evolving science into law.^[12]

“We saw increasing pressure to improve student performance on standardized test scores,” said former superintendent Frank Davidson. “Although

[8] “National Reading Panel Reports Combination of Teaching Phonics, Word Sounds, Giving Feedback on Oral Reading Most Effective Way to Teach Reading.” Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 13 Apr. 2000, www.nichd.nih.gov/news/releases/nrp.

[9] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). The Condition of Education 2017 (NCES 2017-144), Preschool and Kindergarten Enrollment. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=516>

[10] Gamse, Beth, et al. “Reading First Impact Study.” MDRC, May 2008, www.mdrc.org/publication/reading-first-impact-study.

[11] Reyhner, Jon. The Reading Wars: Phonics versus Whole Language. Northern Arizona University, 13 Dec. 2008, jan.ucc.nau.edu/jar/Reading_Wars.html.

[12] Barbash, Shepard. “The Reading First Controversy.” *Education Next* 8, no. 3 (2008). <http://educationnext.org/the-reading-first-controversy/>.

state mandated testing in Arizona does not go into effect until third grade, most school districts start assessing children's literacy skills, phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and word recognition in kindergarten. The push from NCLB, Reading First, and the National Reading Panel put pressure on districts, and contributed to making kindergarten a much more academic enterprise than it had previously been."

In the decade that followed NCLB, states and districts took steps to address literacy challenges made manifest through third grade reading assessments. "These initiatives had some wonderful merit," said Dr. Margie Gillis, a researcher with Haskins Laboratories at Yale University and President of Literacy How, which specializes in applying reading research to successful classroom practice. "But in some cases, there was an overemphasis on foundational skills to the exclusion of comprehension and vocabulary development. As well, too much emphasis was placed on assessment without supporting the teachers' understanding of how to analyze and use data to drive instruction."

Many states enacted laws and policies designed to block "social promotion"—the practice of advancing students based upon age rather than proficiency—to ensure that students could make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn *before* they entered fourth grade and beyond.

Recognition that grade-level reading by the end of third grade was an important predictor of school success encouraged state leaders to act quickly to pass third grade reading laws. It also galvanized philanthropy, nonprofit partners, business leaders, government agencies, states and communities across the nation to work toward increasing the number of children from low-income families reading proficiently by the end of third grade.^[13]

Unprecedented collaborations resulted in sustainable momentum toward a total overall increase in reading proficiency as well as a narrowing of the reading proficiency gap. But national policy shifts accelerated the move toward approaching early learning as a means for building first grade competencies—often at the exclusion of play-based and socioemotional learning critical to building a foundation for long-term academic success.

Kindergarten, over time, shifted ever away from Friedrich Froebel's original intent—to cultivate the preexisting natural knowledge within children to help prepare them for the future, including school and life more broadly.^[14] In many cases, kindergarten classrooms shifted away from developmentally appropriate learning, instead becoming more like a practice run for first grade.

But there need not be incongruity between kindergarten's foundational role in setting the stage for third grade outcomes, and a focus on play-based, developmentally appropriate practice. As former superintendent Frank Davidson put it: "It's not going to diminish the student's academic preparedness to focus on more than just academic standards during kindergarten. In fact, we can more fully ensure the student is prepared by focusing on other skills as well.



[13] "The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading." Grade Level Reading. gradelevelreading.net/about-us/campaign-overview.

[14] H. JEYNES, WILLIAM. (2006). Standardized Tests and Froebel's Original Kindergarten Model. Teachers College Record - TEACH COLL REC. 108. 1937-1959. 10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00769.x.

Dr. Margie Gillis believes that developmentally appropriate instruction in kindergarten is about striking the right “balance between ensuring that kindergarten age children are exposed to big ideas and vocabulary, and also understand how to self-regulate. Children can thrive in a classroom that intentionally develops their ability to function within a learning environment, and that also exposes them to ideas, concepts, vocabulary, and opportunities for language expression and development.”

Because students do need to come to later grades knowing how to function well in a classroom setting, knowing how to be self-motivated and self-monitoring. So it is a challenge to respond to those concerns from farther down the pipeline. But that is one of the challenges in making any changes in caring for children.”

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Kindergarten Confidential: What's Happening in Today's Classrooms

Even without guidance from adults, young children play. They imagine alternative universes. They envision realities unencumbered by the rules or bureaucracies of real life. And they create problems—then solve them. Perhaps *because* children naturally engage in play that does not require adult intervention, many adults interpret play as a relief from the rigors of learning rather than a deep form of learning in itself.

In fact, play is an integral part of rigorous learning experiences that are essential to healthy development and learning for young children. It is play that ignites interdisciplinary thinking and kindles the development of executive function and creative problem-solving—critical skills for success in learning and in life.

Executive function is, for example, key to focusing attention, to interpreting the full complement of physical and environmental variables that enable individuals to make decisions about appropriate behavior, and to succeeding in academic settings.^[15] And the extent to which these skills are developed, early on, can have an enormous impact on learning outcomes and academic achievement in later grades.

Educators have been supporting the development of executive function and content knowledge in the same lessons for many years. Savvy teachers know that guided play can tap the potential of project-based learning by building skills that encompass core academic subjects like math and ELA. It can cultivate important but less tangible skills, like persistence and critical thinking. It can create a framework for introducing real-world problems, allowing younger children to bring their experience of reference to problems they are ready to learn about and understand.

“Intentionally purposeful play is not just going to the block corner or the housekeeping center,” according to former Superintendent of West Hartford Public



Schools in Connecticut, Karen List, who now directs the PK–3rd Grade Leadership Program at the University of Connecticut Neag School of Education. “It really is intentional, and includes focusing on complex cognitive processes. Children get engaged in planning what they play, and in directing these learning scenarios. The teacher helps model what planning looks like, but then it can really be from the children that they derive the ideas and activities.”

These strategies are designed to not only make school more engaging and relevant—they help to set the stage for improved educational outcomes. According to List, New Britain Public Schools in Connecticut “saw a decrease in chronic absenteeism and a decrease in discipline referrals after adopting play-based learning in their pre-K through first grade classrooms. If children are present and if they are engaged and not emotionally distracted or behaviorally distracted, they are able to learn. In these classrooms, the kind of learning experiences that are being designed by teachers are much more engaging and meaningful.”

[15] “Executive Function & Self-Regulation.” Harvard University Center of the Developing Child. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>.

Playful learning allows children to notice, wonder, and persist—habits that encourage them to slow down, follow questions, find solutions, and learn from their struggles. “The experience of play changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain.”

Guided play and play-based learning in early childhood help to fit skill development into students’ existing schemata—their mental frameworks for how the world works—to help them build and expand upon their understanding of key concepts. A prop box of pretend picnic food, for instance, allows children to answer open-ended questions that promote divergent thinking, or seeing things from different viewpoints so children can stretch their thinking skills. Two studies from labs at MIT^[16] and UC-Berkeley^[17] highlight similar results: instruction from a teacher gets children to specific answers more quickly, but opportunities to play, explore, and discover lead children to create new and unexpected solutions to problems.

In kindergarten, guided play can provide a scaffolding of information that aligns children’s lived experiences with formalized learning. Playful learning allows children to notice, wonder, and persist—habits that encourage them to slow down, follow questions, find solutions, and learn from their struggles. “The experience of play changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain,” says Sergio Pellis, a researcher at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, who says those changes are critical in learning to regulate emotions, make decisions, and solve problems.^[18]

Young children have not yet developed the ability to understand abstract concepts, and formalized learning in later grades largely relies upon abstractions that require children to set aside their experiences and

ponder things conceptually. But these structures are both ineffective and unnecessary—in early grades and later on—because most learning can effectively happen in real life (or simulated real life) experiences rather than in fully abstracted lessons (like completing mathematics worksheets or learning language by phoneme). Kindergarten classes might, for example, utilize structured role play games to teach concepts covering anything from respect to turn-taking to counting.

Kindergarten programs that begin with the real world in mind set a foundation for later learning that is couched in meaningful applications—and also help children to connect more abstract concepts they encounter later with their own contexts.

While young children may not yet be prepared to dig into the ways that numbers can be reflected by letters, for example, they can understand how larger quantities are different from smaller quantities when it comes to how much food a family might prepare for a shared meal.

Rather than present children with complex story problems, kindergarten educators can help young children understand these conceptual differences by providing them with the tools to explore quantity in scenarios where they have to engage and negotiate with peers. That kind of play allows children to extend their learning without having to also master new skills around “learning how to learn” in more formalized contexts.

[16] Elizabeth Bonawitz, Patrick Shafto, Hyowon Gweon, Noah D. Goodman, Elizabeth Spelke, Laura Schulz, The double-edged sword of pedagogy: Instruction limits spontaneous exploration and discovery, *Cognition*, Volume 120, Issue 3, 2011, Pages 322-330, ISSN 0010-0277, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2010.10.001>. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0010027710002921>)

[17] Daphna Buchsbaum, Alison Gopnik, Thomas L. Griffiths, Patrick Shafto, Children’s imitation of causal action sequences is influenced by statistical and pedagogical evidence, *Cognition*, Volume 120, Issue 3, 2011, Pages 331-340, ISSN 0010-0277, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2010.12.001>. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0010027710002258>)

[18] Hamilton, Jon. “Scientists Say Child’s Play Helps Build A Better Brain.” NPR, NPR, 6 Aug. 2014, www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/08/06/336361277/scientists-say-childs-play-helps-build-a-better-brain.

Balancing Act: From Policy to Practice

Educators and school district leaders, of course, know that child development does not respond to policy and political pressure. But the paucity of early educators in leadership roles may mean that few school and district leaders are equipped to advocate for developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten. As Superintendent Rick Falkenstein explains, “I find that it’s very unusual for leaders to go through the system and become a superintendent or district director with an early childhood background. So the early childhood voice is not a part of many critical conversations and decision-making in the way it should be.”

“When administrators come into a kindergarten classroom or evaluate a kindergarten teacher, do they have the training and knowledge necessary to determine what developmentally appropriate learning and instruction looks like for this age group?” asks Shayna Cook, a former pre-K and third grade teacher and now an Education Policy Analyst for the New America Foundation.

Most school and district leaders recognize that children’s development is neither a matter of linear progression, nor something that can be transcended with instruction alone, but few may be fully equipped to support educators in honing the most effective strategies for early learners. “More people may be talking about supporting ‘whole child’ development, but there aren’t presently a lot of strategies and systems in place to support teachers in fostering that complete development of children’s social, emotional, regulative, and cognitive skills,” notes Falkenstein.



“Teachers are largely left on their own to figure out how to embody a ‘whole child’ practice in a high quality, developmentally appropriate way.”

And although district leaders have long recognized that developmentally appropriate practice is essential to improving outcomes as students mature, many have fallen victim to the notion that developmentally appropriate practices (like play-based learning) do not constitute rigorous education; triggering a “push down” of expectations that forces problematic tradeoffs between academic and social development for kindergarten teachers.

Taken together, leaders’ inexperience with early childhood often means that no one is well positioned to use their experience with practice to push back on well-meaning policy efforts in a productive way. The result is that much of the rich knowledge that the

“When administrators come into a kindergarten classroom or evaluate a kindergarten teacher, do they have the training and knowledge necessary to determine what developmentally appropriate learning and instruction looks like for this age group?”

Ralph Smith, Managing Director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading observed, “That kindergarten plays an essential role in the early learning continuum is unassailable. That role, however, becomes significantly more challenging when kindergarten is expected to fill the gap for children with little or no access to developmentally appropriate supports in the early years. And even more so, when many of those same children have no assurance of high quality teaching in the early grades.”

kindergarten community has developed over hundreds of years is essentially subordinated to priorities that align with the outcomes required in later grades. Rather than improving practice along the later grades so that students stay on track, policy efforts have had the unintended consequence of pushing on kindergarten from both directions. Ralph Smith, Managing Director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading observed, “That kindergarten plays an essential role in the early learning continuum is unassailable. That role, however, becomes significantly more challenging when kindergarten is expected to fill the gap for children with little or no access to developmentally appropriate supports in the early years. And even more so, when many of those same children have no assurance of high quality teaching in the early grades.”

While best practice in early education and kindergarten may not be self-evident, the field is well-informed by both research and experience. To transcend the pressures that are unduly burdening kindergarten today, the field will need to come together to advocate for what’s best along the entirety of the birth to third grade continuum—including specific practices for each year along the way. These practices need not be entirely divergent from one another. “Emerging best practices in upper grades, like enriched STEM curriculum, actually have a lot in common with instructional strategies in high quality kindergarten,” says Superintendent George Rafferty. “Inquiry-driven and problem-based approaches drive discovery and deeper learning no matter the grade level—in kindergarten, it looks like adult-guided, child-directed activities involving peer interaction, student choice, and creative thinking.” Clarifying what is needed at each grade level could help guard against “scope creep” across grades and developmental milestones.

A Path Forward

A critical look at the historical context for today's policies—and practice—helps us to better understand what the future could look like. Standards calling for the development of literacy skills in kindergarten can and should be interpreted and implemented in developmentally appropriate ways, integrating intentional child-directed learning experiences and best practices.^[19]

Not only is it possible to foster language and literacy through a more balanced approach to play and instruction, it is also far more effective for young children. Play serves a critical role in the development of long-term cognitive skills that will enable children to become “college and career ready” in later years; research has demonstrated that children who experience more active, child-initiated early learning experiences perform better in later school years.^[20] Early educators have long been creating this type of learning environment and doing so effectively. Kindergarten should be leading the way, not following the trade winds of education policy.

By finding and maximizing the points of intersection between rigor and developmentally appropriate practice, school districts can prepare students for success in later grades by empowering them to provide students with experiences that help them to build essential skills.

By providing states and school districts with the flexibility to expand classroom focus to the “whole child,”

the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) creates an opportunity to elevate the critical importance of early learning by building on what we know to be best practice. It is not only possible, but incumbent upon schools to deliver developmentally appropriate and deeply rigorous learning experiences to children in kindergarten.

ESSA also creates an opportunity to strengthen kindergarten so that it supports educators in employing observation-based, “invisible” assessments, which provide educators the ability to measure and track students’ progress in ways that do not interfere with learning—or require students to “take” assessments that they may have trouble understanding.^[21] It presents an opportunity to refocus the interactions between teachers and children to those that are play-based, interdisciplinary, and worthwhile.

Fusing academic and social development can create a remarkably rich kindergarten classroom. Rather than rows of students working quietly on practice or listening to the teacher speak, developmentally appropriate kindergarten classrooms are filled with children engaged in activities that match with their learning content. Teachers may send groups of students to different learning centers in the classroom to engage in meaningful projects. Some children will be assisting their peers, and all children will have the opportunity to play with ideas. Play serves as the catalyst for deep engagement and fosters the sort of learning that is critical to building a foundation for long term success in school and in life.

Play serves a critical role in the development of long-term cognitive skills that will enable children to become “college and career ready” in later years; research has demonstrated that children who experience more active, child-initiated early learning experiences perform better in later school years.

[19] Gmitrova, V., & Gmitrova, G. (2003). The impact of teacher-directed and child-directed pretend play on cognitive competence in kindergarten children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 30(4), 241–246.

[20] ECRP. Vol 5 No 2. The Role of Child Development and Social Interaction in the Selection of Children's Literature to Promote Literacy Acquisition, ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/marcon.html.

[21] Berke, Kai-leé. “The Road to Invisible Assessment - EdSurge News.” EdSurge, EdSurge, 13 Mar. 2018, www.edsurge.com/news/2017-02-19-the-road-to-invisible-assessment.

Implications and Considerations: Six Takeaways



Rigor vs. Difficulty

“Rigor” is different from “difficulty.” What makes something challenging does not necessarily mean it is rigorous or that it helps advance learning in the most effective way. Dr. Tony Wagner, founder of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Change Leadership Group, makes the case in *The Global Achievement Gap* that true rigor requires instruction that allows students to delve deeply into their learning, to engage in critical thinking and problem-solving activities, to be curious and imaginative, and to demonstrate agility and adaptability.^[22] And starting students’ first school year with rigorous learning experiences helps set the standard for high quality and well-rounded learning throughout their K-12 experience.



Kindergarten— Leading or Following?

Kindergarten should no longer be the afterthought that succeeds 3rd-8th grade and high school practice and policy. Rather, it should be on the vanguard of best practice that is responsible for setting the tone and establishing the foundation for later learning. Kindergarten can and should be proactive rather than reactive, and the field can do that by productively pressing upward on the K-12 education system rather than accepting efforts to push the K-12 system downward.



...true rigor requires instruction that allows students to delve deeply into their learning, to engage in critical thinking and problem-solving activities, to be curious and imaginative, and to demonstrate agility and adaptability.

[22] Wagner, Tony. *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. Print.



Research Matters

As Isabelle Hau of the Omidyar Network, a philanthropic investor in early childhood education research and innovation, puts it, “What we know from research and science we should be using a lot more in those early years societally. And the research and science demonstrates a strong relationship between play and learning.” What is appropriate for early childhood should be determined by research, led by researchers attuned to developmental milestones and by practice led by experienced professionals, rather than by trying to inoculate children in preparation for potential shortcomings in later learning experiences. According to NAEYC,^[23] a growing body of behavioral research establishes relationships between children’s play and development in several areas, including language, executive function skills, mathematics and spatial skills, scientific thinking, and social and emotional development. These skills are fundamental to the essential activities of learning in school—and in life.



Legacy Literacy Policies

Over the last twenty years, state policies have enshrined, targeted strategies for teaching and measuring literacy development through law. Many policies focused on using more tools to identify students’ reading deficiencies, providing interventions for struggling readers in grades K-3, and retaining outgoing third graders who do not meet established grade-level expectations.^[24] As the research base and understanding of best practices evolve, state policies should create space for districts to integrate a variety of research-driven, rigorous, developmentally appropriate approaches to support literacy development across the pre-K to third grade continuum.



Rethinking State Adoption Policies

A history of well-intentioned policies have pressed kindergarten practices that are misaligned with young children’s natural learning capacity, and current state policies may still be exerting undue pressure on the structure of teaching and assessment. Many states’ adoption policies prescribe subject-matter specific curriculum for kindergarten, as well as grades 1-12. State policies, in turn, encourage districts to utilize precious resources to adopt and employ science, language, and social studies-specific curriculum for kindergarten classrooms—starving districts of resources to invest in more holistic curriculum and professional learning. Can states and early educators play a role in rethinking adoption policies, to move away from an emphasis on academic content in kindergarten, and create both time and resources for developmentally appropriate and guided play-based strategies?



Meeting Students Where They Are

Kindergarten should be marked by activities and practices that bridge the gap between students’ experiences and the ways they are learning in school; this is a precursor to the best approaches later on, which seek to bridge the gap between what students know and can do and real-world challenges and phenomena. Guided play-based activities that help children learn to take academic risks and assume ownership of their learning can lead to far-reaching gains for young children as they continue their educational careers with a greater sense of agency—and they should absolutely become the standard for every young learner.

[23] Hassinger-Das, Brenna, et al. The Case of Brain Science and Guided Play: A Developing Story. NAEYC, May 2017. www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2017/case-brain-science-guided-play.

[24] Workman, Emily. Third-grade reading policies. Education Commission of the States. December 2014. <https://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/16/44/11644.pdf>.

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