Getting Preschool Right

The push for rigorous prekindergarten education has overlooked the evidence on how young kids really learn best

By Melinda Wenner Moyer

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNABEL CLARK
the block room at the Randolph School in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., is bustling with preschool builders. One boy places a tall, wood, cross-shaped block under a newly erected archway, explaining to onlookers that it is a revolving door. On a nearby wall hang drawings the children have made of past creations; sometimes the students build over several days, creating miniature, interconnected cities.

“Thomas wrecked my building!” one child complains. Evan Miklos, his teacher, has been observing the children, occasionally piping in with open-ended questions or suggestions. “Why don’t you tell Thomas how that makes you feel?” Miklos suggests. “Sometimes this kind of thing happens by accident, but it’s okay to tell him you’re frustrated.”

The boy follows his advice, and tension quickly diffuses. Moments later recess begins. The children keep all-weather gear in their cubbies so that they can play outside every day—even when it is raining or snowing. All the kids clean up and head outside for an hour, crossing a red brick patio that they built last year as a group. They did most of the measuring, designing and bricklaying themselves. “Kids love real work,” Miklos says. According to the latest research in early childhood education, Randolph, a private school, is doing a lot of things right.

Randolph, like most high-quality preschool programs, balances scaffolding play and exploratory activities with teacher-directed instruction; other schools rely too much on unstructured play. “We kind of forgot what’s really important is raising humans,” says Deborah Stipek, a professor at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education who studies how children learn. “We kind of forgot that what’s really important is raising humans.”

The Devil Is in the Details

The seeds of our country’s vast reconceptualization of preschool—of what’s really important—were sown in 1983, when President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education published a report entitled A Nation at Risk. It asserted, among other things, that if “an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” The report demanded that the country dedicate greater resources to education to make public school more rigorous.

Fast forward to 2002, with President George W. Bush’s signing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and public schools were suddenly being held accountable for educational outcomes in consequential ways. “Passage of NCLB made for the greatest amount of standardized testing this country has ever seen,” says Samuel Messels, founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.

Accountability itself is not a bad thing; it is important for schools to assess whether their programs are effective. But high-stakes standardized tests are not always reliable, and they can have unintended downstream effects. For one thing, there has been little evidence to suggest that scores on early elemen-
**Preschool by the Numbers**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>% of kids from high-income homes attend vs. % of kids from low-income homes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>About 60% of preschoolers (at any age)</strong> attend a public preprimary school</td>
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**Who Goes?**

- 44% of rural four-year-olds attend vs. 79% of urban and suburban kids
- 29% of all four-year-olds attend a pre-K run by the state
- 25% attend a private preschool
- 9% attend the federal Head Start program

**Public vs. Private**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$8,147 per student in federal Head Start programs</td>
<td>$19,233 Luxembourg</td>
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<tr>
<td>$4,521 per child in state-run preschools</td>
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<th>How Do Teachers Fare?</th>
<th>Median preschool educator’s salary</th>
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<td>30%–37% Annual turnover</td>
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**Average Annual Spending per Preschooler in Other Countries**

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- $14,704 Norway
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- $7,507 France
- $3,172 Turkey

**Who Gets a High-Quality Start in School?**

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- 1 in 5 poor kids

**Rural kids are only half as likely as others to get this exposure**

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<td>$1,778 per child in Mississippi, which spends the least from the nine states that have no public preschools</td>
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Like Abecedarian. They do not serve kids from infancy to age five, nor do they last all day. Funding is also much less generous. Abecedarian spent an estimated $18,648 per child a year in 2016 dollars. In contrast, state spending on pre-K in 2015 averaged just $4,489 per enrolled child.

Abecedarian was also pedagogically distinct from today’s preschool programs. The curriculum was more akin to that of the Randolph School (which, not incidentally, has similar costs—$15,200 tuition a year for a full-day student, although most receive financial aid). Its program largely comprised “learning games” that the children frequently played with teachers, along with lots of shared reading and responsive care.

Many of today’s state-run pre-K programs rely more on direct instruction. They instruct and drill kids on math, vocabulary and literacy skills rather than letting children learn these skills through play and other self-directed activities. There are many potential reasons for this curriculum shift. First, state-run programs are usually formally connected to the public school system, so they tend to adopt the same teaching strategies. Second, preschool teachers may not have the time or resources to devote to creative curriculum development, so they rely instead on “curriculum kits” that offers lead to scripted, teacher-led instruction. “Preschools worried about not meeting expectations—typically the lower-performing programs and those serving disadvantaged students—embrace these products and comprehensive curriculum packages in the vain hope that they’ve landed on the magic bullet that will cover the standards and lift achievement scores without any guesswork,” writes early childhood educator Erika Christakis in her 2016 book The Importance of Being Little.

Finally, because children who enroll in state-run programs are at high risk for future academic problems, administrators and teachers may feel they have to provide more formal instruction to give them an edge—even if this approach is not actually supported by science. “You go out to middle-class preschools, and they’re so much more relaxed—they take time for children to enjoy childhood, they do exciting fun things, they have projects,” explains Jeffrey Trawick-Smith, an early education researcher at Eastern Connecticut State University. “Then you go into Hartford, where there’s real concern about kids and their learning, and it’s just so rigid, and the focus is on direct instruction.” (These trends continue into elementary school: schools that serve low-income kids typically have less recess time than those serving more affluent kids.)

Although few would argue with the need for some direct instruction in the preschool classroom, most researchers say it should not be the primary means for learning. Young children find it boring and have difficulty paying attention; others may find it stressful. Many preschools have prescribed “literacy lessons,” for instance, in which kids are asked to sit quietly on the floor and listen to the teacher talk about the sound a letter makes and what it looks like. Occasionally the children are asked to participate in a contrived exercise, such as shaping their hands like an “O” or sounding out a word as a group. But these scripted, teacher-led lessons limit the amount of spontaneous, one-on-one conversation kids can have with one another and with their teachers—and, ironically, research has shown that frequent opportunities for extended discourse are what boost literacy and language skills the most.

More fundamentally, these kinds of curricula can interfere with crucial facets of preschool teaching. “A lot of times a politically driven agenda details teachers from being emotionally and socially present, which is a really core part of their value,” says Lesley Koplow, director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at the Bank Street College of Education in New York City. In other words, for young children rigid academic curricula can influence the character and atmosphere of the preschool classroom in ways that ultimately stifle learning.

In a 2002 study, Rebecca Marcon, a developmental psy-
For decades researchers have been touting the benefits of free, unstructured play for children. “Play is critical learning in the way that’s developmentally appropriate for young children,” NAEYC’s Hedges says. Kids learn about physics when they play with marbles, levers and ramps; they learn about math and geometry when they play with blocks. Make believe teaches self-regulation. If you are playing the patient and not the doctor, you do not get to use the stethoscope, even if you really want to.

But the science on play has evolved in recent years, and to-day many researchers believe that play can be even more educational for young kids when it’s not free and unstructured but rather when it is guided by skilled adults. “Good teachers set up play experiences, a variety of them,” Hedges says. “When you see there’s a time to introduce complexity to their play and enrich that for them—either verbally or through getting down and playing with them—you do that.”

Free play certainly has a time and a place, scientists say, but it also has limits—when similarly aged kids play together, they can get into a rut and act out scenarios over and over again. I saw this happen when I visited a preschool in Westchester County, New York: The teachers never engaged with the students while they played, and after a while some of the play routines turned stale, and the kids lost interest.

Enhancing Playtime
A number of scenes unfold as the Randolph students frolic outside during recess. Some traverse a rope bridge; others play in a sandbox; a few bang makeshift drums made of overturned plastic buckets. But what seems most extraordinary is the way many of the kids have been inspired to create and play. “At Randolph, teachers participate as students build an outdoor habitat (1) and make observations at a brook near the school (2). Warmth and emotional responsiveness have also been shown to be crucial factors in teaching young learners (3).”

Scaffolded play is more important and useful than it used to be, researchers say, because kids are not having the same types of rich play experiences that they had in decades past. Generations ago kids spent hours a day outside playing with mixed-age groups of neighborhood children. The oldest boys and girls modeled and taught the younger ones more sophisticated forms of play. Today such romps are much less frequent because of parental safety concerns and the takeover of more structured activities such as sports and music lessons. When kids do play, it is typically with kids their own age, who do not provide the same prompts and challenges. But teachers can.

During recess, one Randolph preschool student explained that she was making “sand smoothies” for anyone who might be hungry. A nearby teacher piped up and asked how much they cost, prompting a discussion about money and math.

Research shows that kids got more out of playing when teachers guide, or “scaffold,” imaginative activities, enriching story lines or adding math concepts. At Randolph, teachers participate as students build an outdoor habitat (1) and make observations at a brook near the school (2). Warmth and emotional responsiveness have also been shown to be crucial factors in teaching young learners (3).”

Guided play has also been shown to help with literacy. In a 2010 study, researchers at the University of Delaware had two groups of low-income preschoolers participate in a vocabulary activity twice a week for 30 minutes. One group was taught two vocabulary words using direct instruction the entire time. The teachers in this situation read a book containing the words, showed the children the words in the book, explained what they meant, asked the kids to repeat the definition and did a word-related action to help solidify their understanding. A second group was given similar direct instruction for 20 minutes and then participated in a guided-play activity for 10 minutes related to the two new words. For instance, when the kids were learning the word “bake,” they were given a mixing bowl, oven mitt and timer and told to play-bake.

What Makes a Good Preschool
When choosing a pre-K program, look for signs that the school is employing best practices:

• Kids have ample time to explore, play and be creative using a variety of materials.
• Teachers are warm and responsive and encourage conversation and participation.
• Kids feel safe and secure.
• Teachers set limits about acceptable behavior but also work with students to help them label, understand and cope with emotions.
• Teachers read to the children regularly—not just as a class but individually and in small groups.

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Educational experiences sets the stage for receptivity for what comes later—so if you inherit a nurturing and interesting environment in preschool, that’s what school becomes for you,” Bank Street’s Koplow says. Randolph’s students clearly adored their teachers, and it was not hard to see why—the teachers were all encouraging, responsive, playful and warm. There were more hugs in one day than you could count.

Valuing the Invaluable

Considering everything that goes into making preschools good, it is not too surprising that our country has so few of them. High-quality curricula require a lot of money and planning to create; they take a tremendous amount of skill to implement. Yet “it’s hard to demand a lot of education and preparation when you’re going to earn a salary as low as preschool teachers [get],” Stipek says. Indeed, the median preschool salary in the U.S. is $28,570, according to a June 2016 report co-published by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Janitors and hairdressers are paid more.

Why are these crucial jobs—roles that shape the lives of our future generations—so underpaid? In large part, Nebraska’s Meisels blames sexism: 97 percent of preschool teachers are women, so it is “seen to be women’s work, and—I hate to say it—even unskilled work,” he says. In fact, as of 2015, 16 states did not require their preschool teachers to have bachelor’s degrees. And four of those states—Texas, Florida, Arizona and Massachusetts—did not require them to have specialized training in early childhood education.

Preschool could be a way to help every American child, regardless of background, reach his or her fullest potential. But first, researchers say, the country needs to stop valuing universal preschool in and of itself and recognize that it is only high-quality preschool that can accomplish this feat. Then the country needs to be honest about what separates the good from the bad. We need to invest much more richly in our preschool workforce, understand the research on how young children learn, and stop worrying so much about tests and other useless proxies. It is time to put aside the worksheets and curriculum kits and let our nation’s preschoolers learn the way they do best—by engaging meaningfully with others and the world around them.

More to Explore

- National Association for the Education of Young Children: www.naeyc.org
- From Our Archives
- The Serious Need for Play. Melinda Wenner Moyer; February/March 2009.