

Whatever Happened to Kindergarten?

The traditional kindergarten, that poetic and mystical garden planted by Frederick Froebel, has vanished. In its place is a serious, academic bootcamp where the recruits learn the three Rs in formal groups according to a rigid daily schedule interrupted once a week by specialists offering arts, crafts, and physical education. The message our little campers get is clear: "It's a hard, cruel world out there, so if you want to get to Harvard, you gotta start now, kid!" Something is very wrong here.

For one thing, children do not learn how to learn, an important goal of kindergarten and, indeed, of all schooling. Instead, children learn that reading is the main avenue to learning, a notion that negates the validity of other powerful avenues, such as sensory learning, experience, and intuition.

Learning by reading is inefficient for the preoperational learner who has not yet progressed from concrete to abstract thinking (Piaget 1970). This child understands, learns, and remembers only what he has experienced. When directed in his phonics lesson to make the sound a cat makes, little Tommy replied, "I can't. We don't have a cat."

Undue emphasis on the three Rs takes time away from the whole curriculum, including science, social studies, physical education (whatever happened to *mens sana in corpore sano?*), arts and crafts, and children's literature. The three Rs are only tools for learning those liberal and fine arts, which make us whole, feeling, caring citizens. Teaching children isolated skills fragments the child's sense of wholeness:

I believe we are witnessing a growing emphasis upon the child as a brain; upon the cultivation of narrowly defined cognitive skills and abilities; and above all, upon the creation, through our preschools and schools, of a race of children whose values and progress are judged primarily by their capacity to do well on tests of intelligence, reading readiness, or school achievement.

Although children are whole people—full of fantasies, imagination, artistic capacities, physical grace, social inclinations, cooperation, initiative, industry, love and joy—the overt and, above all, the covert structure of our system of preschooling and schooling largely ignores these other human potentials in order to concentrate on cultivating a narrow form of intellect (Gross and Gross 1977, p. 236).

In the nineteenth century kindergarten—that haven for children to grow, learn how to learn, cooperate, and live together—children held hands and contemplated the unity of God and nature (Froebel 1903). The teacher, or kindergartner, as she was called, was well-educated, cultured, articulate, and highly respected. She taught a half-day session so that she could visit the children's homes in the other half. Alas, that beautiful garden . . . those tender seedlings . . .

What, in contrast, does the twentieth century gardener do? Dig up that garden. Plant the new seedlings in neat, orderly rows. Forget that plants need light, sunshine, rain, and fresh air. Feed daily with the three Rs, and fertilize once a week with music, art, and physical education. Disregard variety, which adds interest and charm; it's too difficult to give individual plants special treatment. Weed out the weaker ones who won't survive, or else send them back to the transitional greenhouse for more time to grow. Measure your plants often to make sure they will compete favorably with the Russian and Japanese varieties. Don't be concerned about the gardener; any one will do (after all, it's only kindergarten). Last, but not least, work with these seedlings all day long.

At issue is not the length, per se, of the school day, but what goes on in the kindergarten program. If extending the kindergarten day means teaching more of the same, I say, "Don't bother!" An all-day, extended-day program should be redesigned to include daily art, music, crafts, movement, physical education, and children's literature. Children should enjoy regular field trips, expanded opportunities for questions and answers, critical thinking, and frequent rest periods. The predominant teaching/learning mode should be play. Throw out the workbooks, worksheets, and flashcards. Bring back experience charts, Cuisenaire rods, and autoharps.

Remember, you're dealing with five-year-olds.

References

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only "book learning" is worthwhile. Because the young parent I mentioned earlier thought her child was "reading," she assumed that kindergarten could be dispensed with. In fact, the child made no sense out of the "reading" she was doing. A rich kindergarten experience would have been far more appropriate to the needs of this five-year-old. Hothouse forcing may make bright cyclamens bloom for winter holidays, but it's not a wise move in educating children.

The Limitations of Efficient Schools

Why do schools force children to work beyond their developmental readiness? Probably for two reasons: a drive toward organizational efficiency and a lack of understanding and application of child development principles. In the first place, it is much easier, neater, and more "efficient" to set up a classroom with tidy adult-made bulletin boards and stacks of phonics and number workbooks. On the other hand, large unit blocks that provide excellent opportunities for developing physical dexterity and coordination, as well as presenting delightful challenges to a child's ingenuity, are expensive, bulky, and cumbersome. Likewise, while classroom animals provide a living laboratory dealing with birth and death and everything in between, animal care, feeding, and sanitation cost money and time. Making arrangements to find the animals a home over vacations when the school is cold and dark pose an added burden.

The second reason that the academic curriculum is pushed down to younger and younger children lies in the unfortunate fact that too few adults

"It appears that children are going to be in school longer at a younger age for reasons extrinsic to their needs."

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