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
T he 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.”

Two students build together at the Randolph School, a private school that runs from prekindergarten through fifth grade. High-quality preschool programs balance freewheeling playtime with structured activities and guidance from teachers.

Over the past two decades policy makers in many states have come to recognize the foundational importance of preschool—especially for lower-income children—and have earmarked funds to support it. In 2013 President Barack Obama unveiled a plan to provide universal preschool to all low- and moderate-income four-year-olds across the country, citing as its a way to narrow the vast achievement gap that persists between wealthy and poor kids. In 2012 28 percent of high-income kids, are getting a high-quality preschool education, according to the Center on Enhancing Education Outcomes, while only 8 percent of low-income children attend preschool. One study found that 0.4 percent of rising U.S. kindergartners were administered readiness tests, 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.

Amid a growing emphasis on math and reading tests, “we kind of forgot that what’s really important is raising humans,” says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a Temple University psychologist.
Attendance Numbers of kids from low-income homes vs. 77%

1 in 3 affluent four-year-olds

How Do Teachers Fare?

30% – 37% in management

Median preschool limited training and instability
staff, driven by low wages, among pre-K and child care

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

How Much Is Invested?

$8,147 spent per student in federal Head Start programs

$4,521 average annual per-child spending in state-run preschools

Who Gets a High-Quality Start in School?

1 in 3 affluent four-year-olds

1 in 5 poor kids

Public vs. Private

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

$16,431 per child in Washington, D.C. (the most in the U.S.)

$1,778 per child in Mississippi, which spends the least apart from the nine states that have no public preschools

SCHOOL FUND

$28,570 Median preschool educator’s salary

$54,890 Median salary for a public elementary school teacher in the U.S.

Average Annual Spending per Preschooler in Other Countries

$19,233 Luxembourg

$14,704 Norway

$10,477 Finland

$7,507 France

$3,172 Turkey

Who Goes?

44% of rural four-year-olds attend vs. 79% of urban and suburban kids

About 60% of preschoolers (at any age) attend a public preprimary school

Preschool by the Numbers

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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 gener-
ous. 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-
giving. Many of today’s state-run pre-K programs rely more on direct instruction. They instruct and drill kids on math, vo-
ocabulary 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 often lead to scripted,
teacher-led instruction. “Preschools worried about not meeting
met the standards and lift achievement scores without any guesswork,” writes early
childhood educator Erika Christakis in her 2016 book The
Importance of Being Little.

Importantly, the way that 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 sponta-
neous, one-on-one conversation kids can have with one anoth-
er 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 polit-
cally 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 Respons-
sive 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 pre-
school classroom in ways that ultimately stifle learning.

In a 2002 study, Rebecca Marczen, a developmental psy-

cation researcher at Eastern Connecticut State University.

“The current situation in 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

caregiving time than those serving more affluent kids.)

Although few would argue with the need for some direct

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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 over-turned plastic buckets. But what seems most extraordinary is play in a sandbox; a few bang makeshift drums made of over-turn outside during recess. Some traverse a rope bridge; others play

For decades researchers have been touting the benefits of free, unstructured play for children. “Play is critical in the learning that’s developmentally appropriate for young children,” NAECY’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 go to use the stethoscope, even if you really want to.

But the science on play has evolved in recent years, and today many researchers believe that play can be even more educational for young kids when it’s 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.

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 active, hands-on and usually social experiences.”

Children can be engaged in, for example, looking at a pile of sand or a leaf under a microscope,” Yale’s Christakis says. “It’s not necessarily play, but it’s very engaging and requires active, hands-on and usually social experiences.” Of course, ample play or exploratory time is not all that a preschool classroom needs, either—more important, in fact, may be the warmth and emotional responsiveness of the teacher. This is often lacking in programs with poor resources. At a private preschool I visited outside of New York City, one that allowed parents in, he recently authored a book on the topic, “Scaffolding Play: Engaging Kids with Materials and Concepts.”

Research shows that kids get 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 (+ or 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).

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.

The children who participated in the guided play performed much better on standardized vocabulary tests designed to assess verbal ability: 62.5 percent of the kids who did guided play met age-appropriate benchmarks compared with only 44 percent of those who got only direct instruction. Scaffolded play encourages kids to engage with materials and concepts in meaningful ways—far more than when they hear a lecture. Indeed, many researchers note that child-directed activities that are not technically “play” can still be highly educational. “Children can be engaged in, for example, looking at a pile of sand or a leaf under a microscope,” Yale’s Christakis says. “It’s not necessarily play, but it’s very engaging and requires active, hands-on and usually social experiences.” Of course, ample play or exploratory time is not all that a preschool classroom needs, either—more important, in fact, may be the warmth and emotional responsiveness of the teacher. This is often lacking in programs with poor resources. At a private preschool I visited outside of New York City, one that allowed hours of free play each day, the lead teacher did not invite her students to speak up or share thoughts during circle time or when she was trying to teach new concepts. One child who wanted to add her perspective to a discussion was admonished and told to be quiet. At snack time a boy who said he did not like his snack was told that he was not “being nice.”

In a 2001 study, researchers at the University of Virginia found that the quality of children’s relationships with their kindergarten teacher predicted various academic and behavioral outcomes in eighth grade. “Whatever happens in children’s first experiences at home, and yet these are also the kids who tend to enroll in the best programs. Put another way: the youngsters who need high-quality preschools the most are the least likely to get them.

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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. M

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.