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Chapter One

Kindergarten Rules!



Toward an enhanced vision of kindergarten play—playing with language

Kindergarten teachers have always known how important they are in children's lives. They know they stand at the crossroads between home or community preschool and school, between family literacy and school literacy, between oral language and full-fledged literacy. They know that in creating a happy transition to school—immersing children in its routines, encouraging children's natural appetite to learn while nurturing their social-emotional development—they bring peace of mind to parents and limitless possibility for children. Nonetheless, I believe we have been slow to recognize the awesome contribution of a good kindergarten teacher to later academic success. I believe we may have underestim-

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ed the power of kindergarten to change the developmental trajectory of children who start school behind as well as sustain the motivation and engagement of children who start school with a wealth of experiences with language and literacy.

Federal policy, particularly “No Child Left Behind,” arguably has changed the conversation in our schools from “Some children can’t learn” to “How can we teach all children to read?” Many states, including my own state of Tennessee, require that schools publish not only the test scores and school grades that compare one school with another, but also the value or gain in achievement that accrues to children attending that school. Called either value-added or gain scores, these results are equally important for all children, including high-achieving children, who have a right to expect a year of progress for each year of school even though they may have started school with above-grade-level achievement.

As the importance of early language and literacy development for long-term success in school becomes more apparent with every new research study, we have turned our attention to kindergarten. Many states have expanded kindergarten from a half to a full day to enhance learning by all children. A longer kindergarten day makes possible more personal and effective instruction, leading to higher achievement as well as social and emotional benefits for all children (WestEd, 2005; Denton, West, & Walston, 2003).

Kindergarten in the Hot Seat: How Research Can Provide a Calm, Cool Direction

I believe that we need to teach kindergartners to read and write—that’s what I mean by *Kindergarten Literacy*, the title of this book. And I believe that equipping kindergarten teachers with reliable literacy assessments is one of the single most powerful professional development tools we can hand them to attain this goal. Why? Because we have to know what children know in order to teach them what they need. Only then can teachers differentiate their instruction to meet each child’s need. When kindergarten instruction matches assessment, rich

literacy practices such as read-alouds, letter sorts, and interactive writing push each child's development forward, like gusts of wind hitting a sailboat at just the right angles. And finally, I believe that as kindergarten is transformed by the currents of society today—from the pluses of good preschools and the findings of neuroscience about early learning to the minuses of low family literacy—so, too, is the role of kindergarten teacher transformed, and that professional development is therefore critical. All too frequently, districts purchase new material and expect that teachers' instruction will automatically improve. As one of the teachers told me, "Often we are overwhelmed with an abundance of material we don't know how to use. Professional development matters, kindergarten matters. Kindergarten can rule!"

In the chapters that follow, I'll share the research that informs these beliefs, as well as ready-to-use assessments, step-by-step guidance on interpreting the results, and examples of how to use the results to plan your instruction. In Part Four, I'll detail the routines and practices that you draw from as you tailor your instruction. For now, here are a few of the foundational research findings that I'd like you to keep in mind as we explore the current climate of ideas about kindergarten.

Just Being There Makes a Difference for Some Children

We used to think that if children are behind at school entry, then they will learn at a slower rate throughout their schooling, never catching up to their more advantaged peers.

Sociologist James S. Coleman used this theory to explain the impotence of schooling in the face of poverty. How else can we explain the ever-widening gap in achievement between many children of poverty and their peers, he reasoned. Nonetheless, Barbara Heyns, a researcher who studied achievement in the Atlanta public schools, published a study several decades ago (1978) challenging the Coleman hypothesis that children's gains during the school year are proportional to where children start. Instead, Heyns found that school makes a huge difference—it is the out-of-school time that accounts for the disparity in achievement for poor children. By studying longitudinal achievement patterns, including achievement upon school entry and over the summer months, sociologists Doris Entwisle, Karl Alexander, and Linda Olson further elaborated Heyns' work. They developed a "faucet theory" of schooling—the spigot of school resources is turned on when school is in session

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and off for children of low-income families during out-of-school time. For children of low-income families, just being in school makes a difference: “Home resources do not cause students to learn more during the school year. Rather, home resources provide students the opportunity [to learn] outside school [or] when schools are closed” (1997, p. 47).

Personalizing Instruction Is the Heart of It All

Children with few experiences with language and literacy outside of school—often called “school-dependent” children—need teachers to teach them. They need teachers who believe that they can accelerate the development of children who arrive “unready” for kindergarten, who can “bring them along,” in the words of one teacher. Such teachers hold what researchers Mary Lee Smith and Lorie Shepard referred to as “interactionist beliefs,” that is, they revise their instructional interactions, not their expectations for learning, when children do not make progress. Marie Clay, noted educator and Piagetian psychologist, and founder of the Reading Recovery movement in this country and the literacy program in New Zealand, said she herself was unprepared for the dramatic way that appropriate teaching in reading could accelerate young children’s development.

As the “unready” children enter kindergarten, we cannot see their lack of literacy as something that will limit what they can accomplish as learners and what we accomplish as their teachers, but rather, as I wrote in *The Reading Teacher*:

“...the individual and variable development of children is an opportunity to personalize our instruction. As teachers we must celebrate and affirm, but also extend and elaborate each child’s developing knowledge of written language” (McGill-Franzen, 1992, p. 58).

Increasing the Intensity of Kindergarten Is Beneficial

Restructuring kindergarten to increase the time and intensity of instruction has profound, long-term beneficial effects on children’s development. Entwisle, Alexander, and colleagues conducted a “beginning school study” in Baltimore (1987) to determine the influ-

ence of more time in kindergarten on children's social and cognitive skills and their attachment to school. They found that students who attended all-day kindergarten were absent less, less often retained (two times as likely to avoid retention!), and achieved higher teacher ratings and test scores than those who attended half-day programs (p. 156).

Policy maven Malia Villegas confirmed past studies and summarized what we currently know about all-day kindergarten in the 2005 WestEd Policy Brief, *Full-Day Kindergarten: Expanding Learning Opportunities* (available online: www.wested.org/policy).

A full kindergarten day provides teachers more flexibility to move children forward or elaborate skills, depending on what individual children need, and makes possible more autonomy and self-selection of activities by children. Children benefit academically, with higher reading achievement, and socially and emotionally, with less frustration and deeper attachment to school.

Bringing Home Literacy Practices to School Is Key

In a seminal intervention study, Delores Durkin (1974–75) restructured the kindergarten classroom to more closely resemble the home literacy experiences of children who learned to read early. She integrated read-alouds, talk about books, talk about writing, posting special words like names, and talk about spelling and letter formation in service of early writing. Whenever children learned a new letter, they were taught that knowing that letter “would allow them to write words” (p. 13), and teachers demonstrated by writing words with the same initial sounds. Letter names and sounds were taught in the context of familiar print and authentic purposes—to write and read children's names or bulletin boards in the classroom; to respond to stories read aloud; to understand labels, street signs, birthdays, addresses, and phone numbers. Because parents of early at-home readers reported reading aloud frequently and taking time to talk about stories and respond to the children's questions, time was set aside each day for story reading and talk in the curriculum of the school.

Durkin's kindergarten schedule was divided into 15-minute, 20-minute, and 30-minute blocks of time. One 20-minute time period was devoted to daily literacy instruction, with one day of the week devoted to reading, one day to writing, one to letter identification, and one to numbers; the fifth day was open, often spent on learning colors and

color words. A daily 20-minute free choice period included writing or drawing on slate boards as well as traditional play activities. Teachers allocated 30 minutes daily for art and 20 minutes daily for music. Because teachers wanted to infuse the school day with the language and literacy that early readers experienced at home, they typically taught art in service of language—art provided the context for writing. For example, children might print names on projects, write addresses on house pictures, draw and caption an experience, write name cards for clay figures they'd made, and label pictures. Just as home literacy experiences evolved from children's interest in and everyday uses of reading and writing, so, too, did the kindergarten curriculum.

Always sensitive to criticism that she was “hot-housing” youngsters, Durkin made clear in her research reports that there was no pressure on the children to achieve: “[C]hildren’s responses [were] always used as the criterion in making decisions about the content, pace, and duration of instruction” (p. 13). Durkin reported that it was better to go too slowly than too quickly—there was no goal of the highest possible achievement.

Even so, children who participated in Durkin’s kindergarten classes significantly outscored comparison groups in first and second grade. Children in the treatment group were able to identify ten times as many words as children in the control. Amazingly, the effect size at fourth grade was between .50 and .41—a half of a standard deviation on test scores in reading. Translated into percentiles, the effect would move a kindergarten child from the 50th percentile to roughly the 70th percentile, or a below-average child into the average range, and in the Durkin study, that effect still held by fourth grade.

Kindergarten Reading Changes Lives

In other kindergarten studies, researchers supplemented teachers’ regular classroom instruction with whole-class, small-group, and individual reading of “little books” and follow-up writing activities (Phillips, Norris, & Mason, 1996; Hanson & Farrell, 1995). The effect size of the Phillips et al. intervention at fourth grade was almost one-third of a standard deviation above average in reading for children who participated in the program. The effects of the second “little books” intervention reached way beyond fourth grade—the influence of the kindergarten year was still felt two decades later.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that teaching children to read in kindergarten can change lives is that of a study of high school seniors carried out by researchers Ralph Hanson and Diane Farrell (1995). This study, one of the most comprehensive evaluations of kindergarten ever done, followed up on about 4,000 students from 24 districts in ten states who had been taught to read in kindergarten. By the time they were contacted and evaluated for the study, more than 12 years had passed between the kindergarten experience and their senior year, yet the researchers found “extraordinary” benefits for the children:

“...[N]ot only did the students who received formal reading instruction in kindergarten exhibit a clear pattern of (a) showing superior current reading skills, (b) having higher grades and better attendance in school, and (c) needing and receiving significantly less remedial instruction in both elementary and secondary school, but they were also from families with a significantly lower social class status and parent education as compared to those in the other two comparison groups” (p. 923).

Thus, in spite of fewer family resources, students who received kindergarten reading still outperformed higher socioeconomic students (SES) who did not. However, kindergarten reading was a beneficial experience for all students, including the advantaged, in that it reduced poor readers in all groups. Across all groups, children who spent the most time in reading instruction experienced the greatest gains and long-term effects so that “the more reading instruction, the better” the results.

The reading instruction that these high school seniors experienced as kindergartners consisted of 52 story booklets sequenced developmentally into ten units that the children read aloud and took home; each story had discussion questions about the story characters and plots; students were assessed on skills at the end of each unit and provided with instructional support for skills not mastered (p. 912). Through group flashcards and games, children learned sight vocabulary and decoding (instruction focused on “sequencing and presentation of the critical sounds and words needed to gain initial competence in reading” (p. 912). Total instructional time was 20 to 30 minutes daily. The researchers argued that profound social benefits accrue as a result of this investment in kindergarten reading

instruction: “How much does it save society when the proportion of illiterate high school seniors [defined as approximately fifth-grade reading level] is reduced by one-third?”

The impact of kindergarten is long-lasting and powerful. As the authors of the intervention chapter in the *Handbook of Reading Research* assert, kindergarten can be at least as potent as Reading Recovery, a program that has attracted more attention and funding: “The trace of the kindergarten intervention appears to be as resilient as the one for an intensive first grade intervention such as Reading Recovery” (Hiebert & Taylor, 2000; p. 477). The results of the Hanson & Farrell study of high school seniors suggest that large-scale focused professional development around well-developed instructional materials “can reap substantial benefits for students” (p. 478).



Let's All Get on the Same Page

Social development and literacy instruction needn't be an either/or proposition. If we are to improve literacy in our nation, we all have to embrace the belief that teaching reading to 5-year-olds can be a school experience that's every bit as playful, imaginative, inquiry-driven, and developmentally appropriate as anything John Dewey or Jean Piaget might have dreamed up. We have to stop casting the discussion as skill-and-drill versus joyful learning through play. Explicit literacy instruction is a relatively brief portion of a kindergartner's day.

All teachers want to do their personal best for every child. I wrote this book—and the assessments and teaching routines within—to help you accomplish that goal. I encourage you to use this book as a professional development tool—one that helps you identify children's strengths and needs, but also helps you gain deep knowledge of the process of becoming literate, as you observe and document children's growth over a kindergarten year. As I'll detail further in the next chapter, building more literacy into the kindergarten year requires careful, engaging professional growth for teachers. To maintain children's love of learning and the desire to communicate through talk and writing, we have to do much, much more than stock a teacher's shelves with basals and “little books” and standards.