# The Plight of Early Childhood Education in the U.S.

Joan Almon

In the U.S. there is a huge discrepancy between what we know about how young children learn and what we actually do in preschools and kindergartens. Numerous studies—some extending over decades—show the effectiveness of play-based education that combines hands-on experiential learning with child-initiated play. But that research is largely ignored. Instead, short-term studies that show gains in narrow, discrete skills, such as letter and number recognition, are increasingly used to justify didactic instruction for young children.

The desire for high-speed achievement is not new. The Swiss psychologist Piaget worked for decades until his death in 1980, mapping the stages of cognitive development in childhood. He frequently ran into what he called "the American question" or even "the American disease." It was always the same: How can we get children to do things faster?[1]

For many children the outcomes of the hurried curriculum are unhealthy. Educators and physicians report growing numbers of incidents of extreme behavioral problems in preschools and kindergartens and link these to the stress children experience in school.

When Walter Gilliam, head of the Child Study Center at Yale, surveyed almost 4,000 teachers from state-financed pre-kindergartens, he learned that three- and four-year-old children were being expelled at three times the national rate for K–12 children. And 4.5 times more boys were being expelled from preschool than girls.[2]

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Gilliam did not research the causes of the expulsions, but experts in the field are increasingly examining rising rates of aggressive behavior in preK and kindergarten classrooms. The Alliance for Childhood's Crisis in the Kindergarten includes several examples[3] of the problem as reported in the media:

The *Hartford Courant* reported that Connecticut students in the earliest grades, including kindergarten, are increasingly behaving in ways that pose physical threats to themselves and others.[4] Connecticut schools suspended or expelled 901 kindergartners for fighting, defiance, or temper tantrums in 2002; this was almost twice as many as in 2000.[5]

One New Haven school official attributed the spike in violence among young children to the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and the elimination of time for recess, gym, and other chances to play. "It's not like it was when we were kids, when you could expect to have an hour or so every day to play and explore," she said. "That kind of time just isn't there anymore."[6]

A *Time* magazine article in 2003 linked aggressive behaviors with rising academic pressure in kindergarten and first grade in anticipation of the yearly tests demanded by the No Child Left Behind Act. Stephen Hinshaw, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and an expert in hyperactive disorders, spoke of the need for a broad-based kindergarten approach: "Even more vital than early reading is the learning of play skills, which form the foundation of

cognitive skills," he said. He pointed out that in Europe children are often not taught to read until age seven. "Insisting that they read at 5," he said, "puts undue pressure on a child."[7]

## Slowing Down

The U.S. is not the only country that has invested in a fast start toward mastering reading, writing, and arithmetic in the belief that it would ensure greater success in school. In the 1970s Germany began to "reform" its kindergartens into centers for cognitive achievement. A study was done comparing 50 play-based classes with 50 early-learning centers and found that "by age ten the children who had played excelled over the others in a host of ways. They were more advanced in reading and mathematics and they were better adjusted socially and emotionally in school. They excelled in creativity and intelligence, oral expression, and 'industry.' As a result of this study German kindergartens returned to being play-based again."[8]

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In today's educational world, Finland stands out. Its high school students have ranked at the top or near the top in the well-regarded PISA exam (Programme for International Student Assessments). The test has been given every three years since its inception in 2000. In 2009 it was given to a sample of 400,000 15-year-olds in 57 of the wealthiest countries whose economies comprise 90% of the world's GDP. Initially given only in literacy, the tests now include mathematics and science.[9]

The Finnish education system has received much scrutiny, and its approach to early education can serve as an example. Good quality child care is guaranteed for all children with significant subsidies from the government. Most children do not enter child care until age three as mothers are given financial support if they choose to stay at home for that period. Such financial support is especially strong for the first year so that almost no children enter child care under one year of age.

Children remain in child care, generally called kindergarten in Finland, until age seven when they enter first grade. The programs are play-based with well-trained teachers and aides and low child-adult ratios. For 6-year-olds, half-day programs are also available, usually within the child care centers, which "place a slightly greater emphasis on academic preparation and language development than typical child care."[10] This slow but well-developed approach lays a strong foundation for school success.

Another international example comes from New Zealand where recent doctoral research by Sebastian Suggate at the University of Otago is described in a press release by the University. Suggate found no long term gains from teaching children to read at five compared to teaching them beginning at seven. He decided to study reading in this way because "he could not find any quantitative controlled study within the English-speaking world to ascertain whether later starting readers were at an advantage or disadvantage. He found only one methodologically weak study conducted in 1974, but nothing since that time. Yet people regularly insist that early reading is integral to a child's later achievement and success. He admits to being surprised, therefore, by his own findings that this is not the case."[11]

Suggate conducted three quite different studies, the results of which complemented one another. In the first he re-analysed data collected as part of the 2006 PISA exam "and found that by the age of 15, there was no advantage in learning to read early from age 5."[12]

He then conducted two studies based on research in New Zealand. In the first, he compared the reading ability of 54 children who had attended Steiner/Waldorf schools, where reading was taught beginning at age seven, with 50 children who had attended public schools where reading instruction began at age five. All the children took the same test at age 12 and the two groups scored equally well. The study controlled for variables such as home literacy environments, the economic situation of the parents, parental education, ethnicity, and gender. When the students' reading fluency and comprehension were measured he found "no difference" by age 12 in the reading ability of the two groups.

Dr. Suggate's third study was longitudinal and looked at reading from day one to the end of primary school to see whether differences in school experiences and the primary curriculum at the two different types of schools would have accounted for the ability of Waldorf children to reach the same reading level as their state counterparts by age 12.

Among Suggate's conclusions: One theory for the finding that an earlier beginning does not lead to a later advantage is that the most important early factors for later reading achievement, for most children, are language and learning experiences that are gained without formal reading instruction. Because later starters at reading are still learning through play, language, and interactions with adults, their long-term learning is not disadvantaged. Instead, these activities prepare the soil well for later development of reading. This research then raises the question: If there aren't advantages to learning to read from the age of five, could there be disadvantages to starting teaching children to read earlier (at age 5)? In other words, we could be putting them off.[13]

Suggate's research has been published in several journals and a book is in press at this time.[14]

## The Down Side of Speeding Up

The desire for a faster path to education has combined with the call for clearly defined standards, coupled with narrow forms of assessment, and has led to a new super highway without speed limits or guardrails—a dangerous place for children. When the common core standards[15] were being developed in 2010 by the National Governors Association and others, I looked up "core standards" to better understand what was meant. The term is primarily used in the manufacturing world where it is vital that materials like nuts, bolts, and cement are made in strictly uniform ways.

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Applying the concept of core standards to children, with all the uniformity and mechanistic perfection implied in the term, is completely inappropriate. To further strengthen the approach through the use of high-stakes testing of narrow skills dehumanizes education. It is not surprising that there is widespread disappointment in the results of No Child Left Behind. An education based on such a mechanical view of the human being cannot succeed. We learned this lesson decades ago when Skinner's behaviorism dominated education. Discrete skills were learned, but there was deep concern that creativity was being lost.

A more effective and appropriate approach than standards and high-stakes testing is the use of appropriate guidelines which can be approached with flexibility by well-prepared educators. Rather than testing narrow, discrete skills, we should be using broad-based assessments of growth in cognitive, social-emotional, and physical areas, as well

as assessing creativity and other essential qualities of human life.

What are the long-term consequences of inappropriate early education? Some studies indicate that great harm can be done. A good example is the HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study (PCCS). This study is not as well known as HighScope's Perry Preschool Study. The latter showed significant benefits to children from low-income homes who attended preschool, and the benefits extended well into adulthood.

What is missing from the Perry Preschool picture is that not all preschools yield equally good results. In the late 1960s HighScope began the Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study. In it, 68 at-risk children from low-income families were randomly assigned to one of three preschool classes: (1) a direct instruction program (DI) where teachers used a script and expected correct answers from the children; (2) a traditional nursery school (NS) where children learned through play and whole group activities; and (3) the HighScope program (HS) where children learned through group time and play that contained a cognitive process of "plan, do, and review." The latter two emphasized child-initiated activities. With support from the staff, the three- and four-year-old children in the study pursued their own interests. All the children were followed until age 23, and the outcomes shed much light on the effects of different preschools on children's well-being.

It is important to note that at first the outcomes seemed to be the same for children in all three groups. All experienced a similar large increase in IQ scores from an average of 78 to 105. HighScope comments at the time it concluded that "well-implemented preschool curriculum models, regardless of their theoretical orientation, had similar effects on children's intellectual and academic performance. Time has proved otherwise."[16]

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By age 23, when the study concluded, the DI students showed serious problems in their overall development:

– 47% of the DI students needed special education compared to only 6% of the other students.

– 34% of the DI students had been arrested for a felony offense, compared with 9% of the others.

– 27% of the DI group had been suspended from work, while none of the others had been.

– None of the DI students had married and were living with their spouses, as compared with 31% of the others.

– Only 11% of the DI student had ever done volunteer work, compared to about 43% of the others.

The results paint a clear picture: When children from low-income backgrounds are given an inappropriate early education, it has a lasting negative effect. Yet thousands of children today—millions over a period of time—are subjected to inappropriate preschool and kindergarten education that demand too many gains at too young an age. We are not helping them overcome the learning gap with such methods; we are intensifying their problems. It is time for educators and policy makers to take seriously the rule that guides the medical community: First, do no harm.

## What Have We Lost?

While the U.S. focuses on drilling literacy and math into young children, little attention is being paid to what is being lost. In the summer of 2010 *Newsweek*'s cover story "The Crisis in Creativity" discussed the Torrance creativity test, which has been given millions of times over five decades in over 50 languages. Its creativity scores have been shown to be a better indicator than IQ for predicting which students are most likely to later become successful innovators in a host of professions. Yet when Kyung Hee Kim at the College of William &

Mary analyzed almost "300,000 Torrance scores of children and adults, she found creativity scores had been steadily rising, just like IQ scores, until 1990. Since then, creativity scores have consistently inched downward. 'It's very clear, and the decrease is very significant,' Kim says. It is the scores of younger children in America—from kindergarten through sixth grade—for whom the decline is 'most serious.'"[17]

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Susan Engel, senior lecturer in psychology and director of the Program in Teaching at Williams College, designed research to study curiosity in classrooms. During a number of classroom visits, she saw so few examples of children asking questions and expressing curiosity that she could not continue the study.[18]

The loss of curiosity has profound implications for education. Science and math educators increasingly speak of the need for inquiry-based learning, described as a "focus on student-constructed learning as opposed to teacher-transmitted information." Ironically, student-initiated learning is exactly the way young children learn when allowed to play and engage in hands-on discovery. Many current approaches to kindergarten education inadvertently stifle experiential learning and curiosity in young children, which makes teaching advanced math and science in later grades much more difficult. It is no wonder we are lagging seriously behind other countries in the STEM disciplines—science, technology, engineering, and math. One thinks of Einstein's famous quote: "It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education." It seems that it no longer does.

## What Can We Do?

When the Alliance for Childhood began its work to restore play in early education and in out-of-school settings, we met with other organizations deeply committed to play. Each was doing important work, but each seemed to be working in its own silo. It was a perfect picture of parallel play that had not yet advanced to rich, social play. Once we began working (and playing) together, a movement was born and play gained momentum.

Now it is time to create a similar movement to support a healthy and creative childhood for all children. We are working on a campaign called a Decade for Childhood that can bring together individuals and organizations from many fields here and abroad. Goals include restoring play-based education and other healthy essentials of a good childhood. "A Summit on Childhood" in Washington, DC, in spring 2012 will be hosted by the Association for Childhood Education International and will help launch the Decade.

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