

# The Common Core's first casualty: **Playful learning**



Common Core

**By Jill Bowdon**

*The Common Core's higher standards need not be met by pressuring teachers to discard proven playful learning strategies in favor of procedural pedagogies.*

**Playful learning may sound frivolous** — especially for those who work in school settings where many children enter kindergarten behind their same-age peers. But developmental psychologists have shown that, for young children, play is learning (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek 2006). Play lets children engage in extended interactions that build oral language, imagination, critical thinking, and social skills. Recent evidence suggests that, at least for some skills, playful learning is *more* effective for producing student learning than direct instruction (Fisher et al., 2013; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

As schools implement the Common Core, there have been many public critiques about how new academic pressures are supplanting a more developmentally appropriate curriculum in kindergarten. Early childhood educators have expressed alarm that the new standards will lead to increased emphasis on didactic forms of literacy and math instruction at the expense of hands-on, playful learning (Alliance for Childhood, 2006).

Contrary to popular belief, the Common Core does not prescribe any specific pedagogy and does not forbid playful learning. Rather, its creators state that teachers know best how to teach standards in the classroom. They suggest that implementation of the Common Core may vary depending on the needs of students, schools, and districts — and that teachers can use playful pedagogies to meet standards as they



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deem appropriate (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014).

Early childhood educators are right to be worried: Kindergarten teachers will find it challenging to maintain a playful pedagogy instead of a procedural one. Consider:

- Kindergarten instruction already has changed significantly under No Child Left Behind to become more teacher-centric and less playful.
- Kindergarten teachers don't operate in a vacuum. They feel pressure from peers and leadership to prepare children for standardized tests in 3rd grade, even if kindergarten is not subject to testing.
- Kindergarten teachers who serve disadvantaged populations need to make up considerable ground in order to achieve the more rigorous standards proposed by the Common Core. The pressure to cover more material reduces the likelihood of engaging in exploratory, student-driven approaches, even if these types of pedagogy are associated with a deeper comprehension of the content.
- School districts are buying textbooks and workbooks for kindergarten classrooms, reducing the amount of money available to buy art supplies, sand and water tables, or costumes.
- Because of the rushed adoption and implementation of the Common Core, many kindergarten teachers are unprepared to meet the standards using a developmentally appropriate, playful curriculum.
- Many parents pressure kindergarten teachers to cover basic skills earlier and to introduce more structure because they're less aware of the developmentally appropriate practices recommended by psychologists.

### **NCLB changed kindergarten instruction**

Kindergarten instruction changed dramatically in low- and high-poverty schools during No Child Left Behind (Bowdon & Desimone, 2014). With a colleague, I analyzed data from two nationally representative samples of kindergarten cohorts — one from 1998 and the second from 2010. These data included teacher reports on the content and organization of their instruction based on identical questions in both years, allowing us to calculate the changes in instructional practices over time. The results from

these analyses echo studies that used smaller, localized samples to study changes in kindergarten instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Our findings show that kindergarten has become more academically rigorous. Students are studying content now that is more advanced than that covered in 1998 and spending more time on two subjects tested in 3rd grade: reading and math. Changes have been especially dramatic in reading. In 2010, 77% of students received more than 90 minutes of reading instruction daily, compared with only 32% in 1998 (Bowdon & Desimone, 2014).

Furthermore, we found that teacher didacticism increased. In 1998, only 26% of children spent three hours or more in teacher-directed, whole-group instruction, while in 2010, 45% of students did. Furthermore, in 2010, teachers devoted more instructional time to textbooks and workbooks than previously: Almost 46% of students did language worksheets daily in 2010 compared with only 33% in 1998.

**Common Core standards are vertically aligned, which means that, if kindergarten teachers fail to bring students to proficiency on the expected content strands, each subsequent teacher will have a tougher challenge meeting required benchmarks.**

While didactic and procedural learning increased, the proportion of the day spent on child-selected activity declined. Before the introduction of NCLB, 68% of kindergartners had the opportunity to select their activities in the classroom for at least one hour daily; now, only 44% do. This shift went hand-in-hand with the disappearance of classroom areas devoted to playful learning: Fewer classrooms had water or sand tables, art centers, and dramatic play corners in 2010 than in 1998.

These changes happened at high- and low-poverty schools. We defined high- and low-poverty schools on the basis of eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch: Schools where fewer than 33% of the students were eligible were considered low-poverty schools, while those with more than 66% of students eligible were categorized as high-poverty schools. Our analyses indicate that acceleration of academic instructional time and content, for the most part, occurred regardless of school context. Notably, however, the declines in access to child-selected activity, art cen-



ters, dramatic play corners, science centers, and water or sand tables were more dramatic in schools serving disadvantaged populations.

### **Pressure to lessen playful learning**

Changes to kindergarten instructional practices resulted from shifts in the social organization of schooling. For decades, one of the dominant beliefs was that teachers had autonomy in their classrooms and, as long as they symbolically complied with reforms by changing certain procedures or using terminology associated with the reform, they could continue teaching as they always had (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). But the advent of high-stakes testing on standards made teacher practice more tightly coupled with institutional demands (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). Why has this happened in kindergarten, a grade not even subject to standardized testing?

For two main reasons: First, school and district administrators are more likely to mandate and regu-

late teacher practices. By introducing new organizational routines — such as requiring all same-grade teachers to follow a pacing guide or establishing time minimums that teachers must spend on reading and math instruction — administrators ensure that institutional priorities are coupled with instructional practices (Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2011). It is difficult to maintain a playful curriculum when content and pacing are monitored in this manner, especially if administrators aren't well-versed in early childhood education best practices and don't recognize guided or free play as learning or standards-based instruction. The administrators' regulative pressure makes it clear that these reforms aren't voluntary, making it more likely that teachers will adopt the changes (Coburn, 2004).

Second, Common Core standards are vertically aligned, which means that if kindergarten teachers fail to bring students to proficiency on the expected content strands, each subsequent teacher will have a tougher challenge meeting required benchmarks.

The Common Core introduces a new level of rigor to elementary school curriculum. Students are now expected to reach higher levels of mastery in reading and comprehension by the end of elementary school, and this means that even kindergarten students must make quicker progress toward reading fluency. The rigor of standards in kindergarten and subsequent grades pressures kindergarten teachers to focus primarily on reading instruction and to accelerate the reading curriculum.

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Teachers always have been dependent on one another. But now that every teacher in the school is vulnerable to negative sanctions associated with doing poorly on state tests, this dependency has taken on a different tone. This shared vulnerability pressures teachers to comply with reforms and increase use of procedural learning tailored to tested skills. As teachers comply, they build trust and social cohesion in the school environment (Bryk & Schneider, 2004). In turn, ignoring standardized testing and procedural learning tailored to tested skills leaves teachers vulnerable to critiques from other teachers that they're not doing their job.

Especially for teachers who work with students who have little knowledge of letters and sounds before school entry, meeting the Common Core standards will be challenging and time-consuming. Based on what we know about how teachers at disadvantaged schools responded to accountability pressure under NCLB, we can expect these teachers to adopt a narrow focus on tested skills in reading and math instruction and center their instructional pedagogies around activities that mimic the format of tests (Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008).

### Less support for playful learning

Another obstacle to playful learning is the shift districts are making to spend more on textbooks and workbooks putatively aligned with the Common Core and away from materials that encourage playful learning — including art supplies, dress-up costumes, musical instruments, and sensory tables. During the era of NCLB, there have been significant

increases in the use of basal readers and daily use of workbooks (Bowdon & Desimone, 2014), and there is good reason to believe this trend will continue. Because the same company may author tests and textbooks, students can actually be disadvantaged on the tests if they don't use the workbooks and textbooks. Under these circumstances, teachers have fewer options about how to implement the standards in their classrooms.

Many states rushed to implement the Common Core without significant planning. Because no early childhood educator or researcher was involved in writing the standards and because there has been little support for teachers on how to implement the standards using a playful approach, early childhood teachers are more likely to depend on prepackaged curricula offered by the textbooks and workbooks.

### Parent pressure

A final impetus for teachers to cover basic skills in kindergarten is parental pressure (Stipek & Byler, 1997). Many parents like schooling that looks familiar — teacher-directed with an emphasis on basic skills. Unaware of the best practices recommended by learning scientists and developmental psychologists, parents are eager for their children to accomplish measurable milestones, like beginning to read. With readily available commercial programs like Teach Your Baby to Read, Baby Einstein, and the proliferating sea of educational apps for the iPad, many parents mistakenly prioritize procedural over playful learning at home and want to see these priorities mirrored at school. To appease parents, teachers may need to demonstrate coverage of basic skills, regardless of how congruent these practices are with their own beliefs about pedagogy.

### Preserving playful kindergartens

Although there are challenges, educators can ensure that their instruction lives up to both their professional expectations and the spirit of the new standards.

#### **1. Draw on the expertise of the early childhood community in designing play-based strategies for implementing the Common Core.**

It's possible to implement the standards using developmentally appropriate practices, including a continued emphasis on guided play in the classroom. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has already sparked conversations among educators on this topic through its annual conferences, webinars, and issue briefs

(NAEYC, 2012). Connecting kindergarten teachers in your schools to these resources may help them resolve the incongruence between the conflicting pressures of using what they know to be developmentally appropriate practices and of meeting accountability demands.

## 2. Modify the standards to reflect the scientific understanding of early childhood development.

Two modifications are particularly necessary. First, incorporate standards that address social and emotional learning. Social and behavioral skills, though not assessed by standardized tests, are important predictors of success in schooling and labor markets (Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006). Kids need the ability to get along with others, resolve conflicts, take turns, and persist on tasks despite frustration. Play can be a powerful vehicle for learning these behaviors. Second, incorporate flexibility into the rate and timing of the curriculum in order to meet the needs of slower learners. Scientists know that the rate and timing of skill mastery occurs along a continuum. When standards-based movements accelerate the curriculum, slow learners suffer. Some children will be reading at school entry, and others won't read until much later. This is normal. Institutionalizing this well-accepted scientific principle into standards and practice will help kindergarten teachers maintain a playful pedagogy. For one thing, teachers who work with kids who enter school behind same-age peers will have a chance to work with them in developmentally appropriate ways without undue pressures to accelerate their progress in perverse ways. This also will lend legitimacy to teachers who resist parental pressures to teach basic skills in procedural ways.

## 3. Stop compensating or sanctioning teachers based on standardized tests.

As long as we judge teachers by standardized test scores, there will be a trickle-down of accountability pressure to accelerate curriculum and reduce play. Let's redefine what it means to be a "good teacher" based on our understanding of child development and how children learn, and build institutional support for this definition among principals, teachers, and other parents. **K**

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