

The Way We Live Now

KINDERGARTEN CRAM

by Peggy Orenstein

About a year ago, I made the circuit of kindergartens in my town. At each stop, after the pitch by the principal and the obligatory exhibit of art projects only a mother (the student's own) could love, I asked the same question: "What is your policy on homework?"

And always, whether from the apple-cheeked teacher in the public school or the earnest administrator of the "child centered" private one, I was met with an eager nod. Oh, yes, each would explain: kindergartners are assigned homework every day.

Bzzzzzt. Wrong answer.

When I was a child, in the increasingly olden days, kindergarten was a place to play. We danced the hokeypokey, swooned in suspense over Duck, Duck, Gray Duck (that's what Minnesotans stubbornly call Duck, Duck, Goose) and napped on our mats until the Wake-Up Fairy set us free.

No more. Instead of digging in sandboxes, today's kindergartners prepare for a life of multiple-choice boxes by plowing through standardized tests with cuddly names like Dibels (pronounced "dibbles"), a series of early-literacy measures administered to millions of kids; or toiling over reading curricula like Open Court – which features assessments every six weeks.

According to "Crisis in the Kindergarten," a report recently released by the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit research and advocacy group, all that testing is wasted: it neither predicts nor improves young children's educational outcomes. More disturbing, along with other academic demands, like assigning homework to 5-year-olds, it is crowding out the one thing that truly is vital to their future success: play.

A survey of 254 teachers in New York and Los Angeles the group commissioned found that kindergartners spent two to three hours a day being instructed and tested in reading and math. They spent less than 30 minutes playing. "Play at age 5 is of great importance not just to intellectual but emotional, psychological social and spiritual development," says Edward Miller, the report's co-author. Play – especially the let's-pretend, dramatic sort – is how kids develop higher-level thinking, hone their language and social skills, cultivate empathy. It also reduces stress, and that's a word that should not have to be used in the same sentence as "kindergartner" in the first place.

I came late to motherhood, so I had plenty of time to ponder friends' mania for souped-up childhood learning. How was it that the same couples who piously proclaimed that 3 1/2 – year-old Junior was not "developmentally ready" to use the potty were drilling him on flashcards? What was the rush? Did that better prepare kids to learn? How did 5 become the new 7, anyway?

There's no single reason. The No Child Left Behind Act, with its insistence that what cannot be quantified cannot be improved, plays a role. But so do parents who want to build a better child. There is also what marketers refer to as KGOY – Kids Getting Older Younger – their explanation for why 3-year-olds now play with toys that were initially intended for

middle-schoolers. (Since adults are staying younger older – 50 is the new 30! – our children may soon surpass us in age.)

Regardless of the cause, Miller says, accelerating kindergarten is unnecessary: any early advantage fades by fourth grade. “It makes a parent proud to see a child learn to read at age 4, but in terms of what’s really best for the kid, it makes no difference.” For at-risk kids, pushing too soon may backfire. The longitudinal High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study followed 68 such children, who were divided between instruction- and play-based classrooms. While everyone’s I.Q. scorers initially rose, by age 15, the former group’s academic achievement plummeted. They were more likely to exhibit emotional problems and spent more time in special education. “Drill and kill,” indeed.

Thinkers like Daniel Pink have proposed that this country’s continued viability hinges on what is known as the “imagination economy”: qualities like versatility, creativity, vision – and playfulness – that cannot be outsourced. It’s a compelling argument to apply here, though a bit disheartening too: must we append the word “economy” to everything to legitimize it? Isn’t cultivating imagination an inherent good? I would hate to see children’s creativity subject to the same parental anxiety that has stoked the sales of Baby Einstein DVDs.

Jean Piaget famously referred to “the American question,” which arose when he lectured in this country: how, his audiences wanted to know, could a child’s development be sped up? The better question may be: Why are we so hellbent on doing so?

Maybe the current economic retrenchment will trigger a new perspective on early education, something similar to the movement toward local, sustainable, **organic food**. Call it Slow Schools. After all, part of what got us into this mess was valuing achievement, speed and results over ethics, thoughtfulness and responsibility. Then again, parents may glean the opposite lesson, believing their kids need to be pushed even harder in order to stay competitive in a shrinking job market.

I wonder how far I’m willing to go in my commitment to the cause: would I embrace the example of Finland – whose students consistently come out on top in international assessments – and delay formal reading instruction until age 7? Could I stick with that position when other second graders were gobbling up “War and Peace” – or at least the third **Harry Potter** book?

In the end, the school I found for my daughter holds off on homework until fourth grade. (Though a flotilla of research shows homework confers no benefit – enhancing neither retention nor study habits – until middle school.) It’s a start. A few days ago, though, I caught her concocting a pretend math worksheet. “All the other kids have homework,” she complained with a sigh. “I wish I could have some, too.”

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