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Academic Rigor in Early Childhood Education

“Play is the highest form of research.”

Albert Einstein

Washington Post has published a number of articles on academic expectations in early childhood education. The most recent article (Moriah Balingit, 9/25/16) discusses new research results from the University of Virginia that researchers considered surprising. The results basically demonstrate that expectations for academic rigor at the kindergarten level have increased drastically over the past 15 years, and that the current standards established by the Common Core are probably excessive or developmentally inappropriate.

Surprise. The understanding that young children’s education must focus on development needs such as socialization, play, behavior, and academic readiness skills has long been established in research related to child development, learning, and education. We well know that healthy play and socialization, especially during the earlier years of development, are critical for learning, health, and wellbeing throughout the lifespan. The National Pediatric Association has proclaimed regular periods of developmentally-appropriate play just as important for healthy development as food and rest.

As children progress through the early years of their education, academic demands must be graded according to needs specific to their developmental levels. Child development is not a matter of increasing quantity. There are stages or levels of development, each with qualitatively different characteristics, abilities, and needs that must be incorporated into educational environments, expectations, and instructional procedures if children are to learn effectively. Within each developmental level there is a broad range of variability among the children, especially at the younger ages, resulting in the performance or behavior of too many children being label by misguided authority figures as inadequate, abnormal, disordered, or deviant, when in reality the children’s behavior is within normal limits. This in turn can generate negative perceptions and expectations of the children from others and from the children themselves that can become self-fulfilling prophecies. No child can successfully learn under demands that do not align with developmental characteristics and needs. Children may demonstrate rote memorization of facts or procedures under these conditions, but without concept development or understanding. Even with what seems like successful learning, enforcement of such rote memorization and regurgitation as the standard for achievement can make school and learning distasteful, frustrating, or discouraging for the children, leading to aversion that can obstruct motivation and achievement over time.

This “new” revelation regarding the prevalence of developmentally inappropriate academic expectations and instruction clearly indicates that those in the upper echelon who establish standards and develop curriculum and policy are not listening to those on the front lines of education and childcare. Teachers are routinely faced with implementing those misguided curricula and policies and trying to enforce or support those inappropriate standards with the resulting fallout in student performance and behavior. Both teachers and parents must manage the consequences of these expectations with children at age levels in which normal development naturally encompasses a broad range of variability unaccounted for by these top-down demands and regulations.

- The teachers who must try to force developmentally inappropriate expectations on their students and deal with the multitude of behavioral, emotional, and social problems that result, and then take the blame, receive poor evaluations, and face public devaluation when their students do not meet expectations.
- The parents who have to try to support their young children in meeting excessive expectations and deal with the behavioral and emotional ramifications when the children come home frustrated and upset at the end of the day, have to try to spend inappropriate amounts of time doing homework that is over their heads, and have to go back to school the next day to face repeated failure.
- The educational specialists who have to structure educational intervention and programming around this nonsense, knowing that spending time in the classroom focused on tasks and activities that are inappropriate and make learning a negative experience not only harms the children in itself, but also takes time away from or eliminates tasks and activities that are appropriate and beneficial to the children’s development, health, achievement, and success in life.
- The school psychologists who have to try to distinguish typical from atypical development in children at young age levels within the context of classrooms and schools that consider typical development inadequate, regularly struggle to convince parents and teachers that their children really are normal and are not eligible for specialized services even though they are failing in their school work, and somehow still maintain positive working relationship with staff and parents so they can effectively support the students in whatever ways possible.
- The special education teachers who have to try to clean up the mess when the students do end up on their caseloads, including students who have normal abilities but could not meet expectations, became convinced that they were incompetent, and gave up on themselves and on learning.

Despite the call for research-based programming as the standard in education, the curriculum and policy developers are also clearly not attending to the research and voices early childhood developmental specialists. Such specialists recognize and understand the harm done to children’s development when they are repeatedly faced with failure and told that they are not trying hard enough and their work is inadequate. Among these specialists, as well as the front-line educators and parents, are those who watch with frustration and dismay as the rates of diagnosis for disorders such as ADHD, learning disabilities, disruptive behavior disorders, and anxiety disorders escalate, possibly due to inaccurate beliefs that young children should be able to sit for longer periods of time and

attend to lecture or drill-and-kill academic instruction that is far in excess of understood developmental characteristics and abilities. These children are somehow supposed to behave “appropriately” (quiet, subdued, and unconditionally compliant, the unhealthy antithesis of early childhood) and perform at high levels while trying to maintain such unmanageable behavior. Specialists who well know that convincing children they are disabled and cannot meet expectations because there is something wrong with them, and establishing this assumption and expectation among their parents, teachers, and peers, cripples what could otherwise be healthy development and learning in the right environment.

These parents and professionals have been struggling with these demands and speaking out for a long time, yet it is now a surprise in the upper echelons of academia, and this surprise has turned into practical changes in educational policy and program development practices. This problem has been growing for many years as the nation seek to improve the performance of our schools by establishing standards that increasingly impose higher-level demands on younger and younger children. Years before Common Core was created I observed kindergarten students trying to grasp data and graphs, 2nd grade students trying to learn abstract geometry concepts, and 1st grade classrooms in which the students were expected to write book reports. These young first graders stood up in front of their peers and tried to read reports that their parents had obviously written for them because the children were incapable of completing the assignment and anything less than perfect was intolerable. They floundered hopelessly in their attempts to read sentences and paragraphs that were far beyond their reading and writing levels.

We watch these children as they feel humiliated, become demoralized, and learn to believe they are incompetent, while we know very well that implementing developmentally appropriate instruction that capitalizes on the windows of growth and developmental needs inherent in the neuropsychology of children at all levels of education enhances their performance and success throughout the lifespan. We also know very well what these windows and needs are and when they occur, yet we are stuck in a “the earlier the better” mindset that is guiding policy development but is blatantly wrong and destructive to the development, health, and success of our children.

We loudly proclaim the importance of research-based programming and intervention. There is a tremendous amount of good research available that provides clear guidelines on what we need to do to make our schools successful. We are not following those guidelines. Instead, much of what we are doing is exactly what the research indicates we should not do. We then wonder why our schools and our students are struggling.