

## Pressure-cooker kindergarten

**A new emphasis on testing and test preparation -- brought on by politicians, not early education experts -- is hurting the youngest students.**

By Patti Hartigan | August 30, 2009

Christine Gerzon is the epitome of a kindergarten teacher: warm and wise, quick to get down on her knees to wipe a tear or bandage a boo-boo. She can rhapsodize for hours about a single leaf and philosophize convincingly about the pedagogical uses of paper-mache. "I teach because it's my calling," she says. "It's my life purpose."

Yet two years ago, after 38 years as an educator, she threw up her hands and retired. (Her last job was at the Harrington School in Lexington.) She couldn't stand the pressure.

Pressure? This is kindergarten, the happy land of building blocks and sing-along's. But increasingly in schools across Massachusetts and the United States, little children are being asked to perform academic tasks, including test taking, that early childhood researchers agree are developmentally inappropriate, even potentially damaging. If children don't meet certain requirements, they are deemed "not proficient." Frequently, children are screened for "kindergarten readiness" even before school begins, and some are labeled inadequate before they walk through the door.

This is a troubling trend to an experienced educator like Gerzon, who knows how much a child can soak up in the right environment. After years of study and practice, she'll tell you that 5-year-olds don't learn by listening to a rote lesson, their bottoms on their chairs. They learn through experience. They learn through play. Yet there is a growing disconnect between what the research says is best for children -- a classroom free of pressure -- and what's actually going on in schools.

Take the example of a girl who was barely 5 when she entered Gerzon's classroom. She didn't know her ABCs, but one day in class she made up a song and taught it to the other children. But because of new requirements, "I had to send a letter to her parents saying that [she] is not proficient," says Gerzon. "You tell me that [she] is not proficient in language skills!" The Concord resident, who usually exudes a gentle presence, bristles. "It's destructive, even abusive. That's a pretty strong word, but what do you call it when you take a group of children and you force them to do something that they are not developmentally ready to do? What do you call that? It's abusive."

Psychologist and early childhood expert David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* and *The Power of Play*, echoes Gerzon. When children are required to do academics too early, he says, they get the message that they are failures. "We are sending too many children to school to learn that they are dumb," says Elkind, a professor emeritus at Tufts University. "They are not dumb. They are just not there developmentally."

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**It's been more than two decades** since Robert Fulghum published the oft-quoted (and oft-mocked) essay "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." The piece describes a bucolic world of wonder, a place for cookies and afternoon naps.

That world is long gone.

Earlier this year, the nonprofit advocacy group Alliance for Childhood, based just outside Washington, D.C., issued a report titled "Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in Schools," drawing from nine new studies of public school classrooms around the country. Kindergartners in the studies spent four to six times as much of the school day being drilled in literacy and math as they did playing.

Recess has been truncated or has disappeared entirely in some schools, a double whammy, since children are stressed out by the demands and also deprived of their major stress reliever. The report cites study after study showing increasing stress, aggression, and other behavior problems, and even breakdowns.

Roz Brezenoff taught kindergarten in the Boston Public Schools for 36 years, retiring five years ago. "I have heard stories of kids having what they call psychotic breakdowns in kindergarten, kids who are distressed because they are 'kindergarten failures' because they can't read and they can't write," she says.

To be sure, many children thrive in an academic environment, and some parents seek out institutions like the Edward Brooke Charter School in Roslindale, which bills itself as "unapologetically college preparatory." Teachers there assign nightly homework in kindergarten. But many children that age are not ready for that kind of work, and all are being held to new standards.

These changes grew out of attempts to solve another problem: a disturbing gap between higher-achieving white students and minorities who were falling behind. The state's Education Reform Act of 1993 led to the establishment of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Tests (MCAS), given to all public school students in the state every year from Grade 3 through 8 and in Grade 10, to identify schools and districts where student performance is not improving and to hold those schools accountable by state watchdogs. As a consequence, says J.C. Considine, spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "some districts have developed more challenging but appropriate curricula for kindergarten. But many others have curricula, schedules, and expectations that would have been seen in first grade or beyond 10 years ago."

Around the same time, neuroscientists were discovering a period of rapid brain development between birth and age 5. These advances helped launch the "brainy baby" business, a flood of products that promised to turn tiny tots into budding geniuses. Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, says that "parents are misled by Baby Einstein," the brand that sells books, DVDs, and flashcard "games" aimed at helping very young children get ahead. "They are misled by a marketing culture and a school culture that tells them achievement in early childhood is children sitting at tables doing work sheets."

Then came the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which links federal funding for schools to performance on standardized tests beginning in the third grade. Its passage "put the nail in the coffin" for the old ways, says Ed Miller, coauthor of the Alliance for Childhood study. "Faced with serious sanctions, they weren't going to say, 'OK, let them play and do all the things they used to do,'" Miller says. "Instead, we have to put them in testing boot camp well before third grade."

President Obama has repeatedly emphasized the importance of early childhood education and has committed \$5 billion to early learning programs. Yet it's still unclear exactly what changes the administration will make to No Child Left Behind. "The challenge is to attune the learning experience to how children are at that point in their development, rather than trying to make them something they aren't," says Carol Copple of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a Washington, D.C., accreditation group. "We need to make the schools ready for the kids, not make the kids ready for the schools."

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**Some educators are struggling** to bridge the gap between best practices and the politically driven demand for accountability. Teacher Michael Kenney sits cross-legged on the floor of his cheerful classroom at the Thomas J. Kenny Elementary School in Dorchester. It's time for reading, and a teacher's aide leads some of the children to another room to read out loud to them. These youngsters aren't ready to read yet, and Kenney and Principal Suzanne Federspiel have decided that a reading lesson would only frustrate them. "There is more pressure for children to be readers by the end of kindergarten, and we try to put the pressure on us, not on them," Federspiel explains.

Addressing the remaining students, Kenney pulls out a fly swatter with a hole cut in the middle. "In our classroom, this isn't a fly swatter, it's a word swatter," he says. "I want to find a word, so wham, boom, I swat it!" He whacks the word "the" on a large text mounted on an easel. The children giggle, and for the next 10 minutes, they take turns swatting words. Their glee is infectious, and their swats are precise.

Later, it's time for a writing workshop, and a little break. "If you are done with your drawing and your sentence, you get 20 minutes to play," Kenney says to resounding cheers. "But do a good job, capiche?" In unison, the children respond "Capiche!" In the housekeeping area, two girls are dressing up in hospital scrubs. A boy crawls around the room, meowing like a cat. No one bats an eye.

This is a place of creativity and joy, but it's a tenuous balance. "I try to mix the fun and the lessons," Kenney says. "But we are testing them so much that I barely have time to teach the curriculum. These are 5- and 6-year-olds, and there is so little time for them to be kids."

Ben Russell, assistant director of early childhood education for the Boston Public Schools, is struggling to find the right formula, too. "Some kids aren't ready, and I fear for those kids." Children who struggle in kindergarten are the ones who grow to hate school and who will likely continue to fall behind, he explains. "What becomes of kids who are not reading at the third-grade level?" asks Russell. "We use those numbers to create prisons. And that is a tragedy."

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**Leadership comes from the top down** in schools, but even the most enlightened principals and other administrators are bound by state and federal requirements. "In my mind, the expectations for our kindergartners should be a little higher, but that doesn't mean the practice should be more rigid," says Valerie Gumes, principal of the Haynes Early Education Center in Roxbury. After 21 years in the field, she says, she is weary of the demands to assess, assess, assess. "I'm not opposed to standards, but the amount of time we spend doing these assessments

. . ." A pause. "It's really criminal." A sigh. "But I'm not in charge."

Anthony Colannino, principal of the MacArthur School in Waltham, objected this spring when the state began requiring schools to administer a standardized test to kindergartners whose first language isn't English. "If you gave this test to the general population, people would be beating down doors," he says. "There would be an outcry. If they gave it to my kid, I would say, 'Tell me what day you are giving it, and he will be absent.'"

In fact, Colannino has a 5-year-old son who is about to enter kindergarten in Woburn. He says that his son, like many 5-year-old boys, is spontaneous and active. And since children are now expected to sit quietly for at least part of the day in many kindergarten classes, Colannino is more than a little worried. "He is curious and asks a lot of questions, and my wife and I are concerned," he says.

What does it say when an elementary school principal fears that his own child won't thrive in kindergarten? And what is the new emphasis on academics doing to the children? The Alliance for Childhood report contains chilling statistics. In Texas, the rate at which kindergartners were held back rose by two and a half times from 1994 to 2004. And in 2007, a 6-year-old girl in Florida was arrested for having a temper tantrum in school.

And what of Christine Gerzon's former student, the girl who failed the official proficiency tests but who showed so much potential? "She's still struggling," Gerzon says sadly. (The teacher has kept in touch with the girl's family.) Students get labeled young, at a time when their ability to perform can vary widely from day to day, and it's hard to shake those labels later on. Children's impressions of school, too, are formed early, and when they feel like failures at 5, it's hard to turn that around later. The city of Boston recognized this last year when it formed a public-private partnership with United Way called Thrive in 5, an umbrella agency that is conducting a citywide effort -- starting support and play groups, distributing flyers about health and other kinds of resources, and more -- to help parents prepare their young children for school.

But these grass-roots efforts can only go so far. Early childhood experts have been publishing books, releasing reports, and testifying before Congress, with little change in public policy. Why isn't anyone listening? "It's not the educators, it's the politicians," says Russell of the Boston schools. "The schools don't make the decisions. The politicians are making the decisions to meet political needs." There is also an element of fear among educators, especially in a troubled economy. "You have to be willing to get your wrist slapped a little bit," says Russell. "If the folks who know what's right don't talk about it, we're never going to get anywhere."

And now is the time. The Obama administration has pledged billions, but some experts remain wary that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is proposing policy that sounds like No Child Left Behind. "I think he has bought into the standards and testing model," says Miller. "What we need is a whole reassessment and change of direction."

Meanwhile, more and more children are "failing" kindergarten, according to the Alliance for Childhood report -- and missing out on the kind of early schooling that does help develop 5-year-old minds. Winifred Hagan is a former kindergarten teacher and a vice president at the Cayl Institute in Cambridge, a nonprofit that sponsors conferences for principals and fellowships for the study of early childhood education. She worries that vulnerable kids are being sent down a path to failure inside a system that was created to meet purely political goals. "Kids are spending hours of their day sitting with pencils and tracing dotted lines," she says. "And we call that education? We are kidding ourselves."

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