

As prekindergarten expands in New York City, guiding guided play ^[1]

Author: Bellafante, Gina

Source: New York Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Sep 2014

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

On Thursday, more than 50,000 public school children in New York embarked on their formal education as the city officially began its expanded prekindergarten program, the marquee undertaking of Bill de Blasio's mayoralty. The days leading up to the start of the school year were as frantic as anyone might have predicted - staffing and supplying the program have been compressed into just a few months. Facing safety concerns and other issues, several centers were unable to open; others faced delays.

Logistics are not the true, ultimate measure of the program's efficiency, obviously. The goal of the early-education initiative is to narrow the achievement gap between those growing up in the world of Central Brooklyn and those growing up in the world of West End Avenue. But implicit in the city's approach is the determination to validate a particular ideology on a broad scale - the idea that progressive education has merits for children who haven't been in the company of parents providing ceaseless background noise in the form of conversations about the mechanics of Congress or their favorite Jane Austen adaptations or the idiosyncrasies of Roman traffic or the history of bagels.

Under the stewardship of Carmen Fariña, the schools chancellor, who has spoken frequently about her commitment to joyful learning, more and more poor children will theoretically be taught as the city's affluent children are, which is to say according to the principles of immersive, play-based, often self-directed and project-driven learning.

There is hardly an elite, private preschool in the city that doesn't align itself with the philosophies of Reggio Emilia, an educational model that arose in Italy after World War II and gained prominence in the States in the 1990s with the notion that children must have some control over the course of their learning and must be given a means to express the various languages they possess. Art, music and imaginative play assume a significant role.

If there has been little or no discussion of what will actually be taught in the city's prekindergarten classes, it is in some part because a specific curriculum will be selected by each individual principal or program administrator from an array of options. The overarching theory, though, is that children will acquire knowledge and social skills through interactive guided play.

Different corners of the classroom will be devoted to various kinds of play - blocks, for instance, or dramatic play. Certain subjects will be taught intensely for one to three weeks at a time. If a teacher is doing a segment on botany, a child may choose to open a flower shop in the area devoted to dramatic play, as Sophia Pappas, the city's director of early education, explained to me. If a group of children spontaneously decide one day to open a restaurant, she said, a teacher might suggest to them that the way to remember what their friends have ordered is to write the orders down. The hope is that the child will then begin to try and sound out the spelling of a word like "pizza."

Scholars who study early childhood education see the distinction between this looser, contextually based pedagogy and more straightforward, academic instruction as a false dichotomy. And they see little validity in the argument that a more progressive approach merely benefits those middle-class children who come to school with much bigger vocabularies and reserves of knowledge than poorer children.

A long-term study by the HighScope Foundation, an educational research group, compared the outcomes for at-risk, economically disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds randomly assigned to different preschool groups deploying different types of curriculum. By age 15, those who had more progressive preschool instruction reported half as much delinquency as those who had received more conventionally rigorous academic training. By 23, those who had been taught according to a more child-centric paradigm demonstrated fewer felony arrests, less emotional impairment and more aspiration to higher learning.

The study's sample size of 68 children was small, however. And it is hard to imagine any piece of research countering the vast cultural anxiety we possess around early learning. Even though children are not subjected to standardized testing around the Common Core in the

early grades, there are in fact still Common Core standards to be met in prekindergarten. There is the expectation that children will enter kindergarten with a certain “reading readiness,” as Chancellor Fariña put it. The emphasis on joyful, play-centered early learning exists in a society where, within less than a decade, the percentage of kindergarten teachers who said children should be taught to read before first grade more than doubled, to 65 percent.

How the city’s educators will cultivate an environment of thrilling, digressive learning while aiming to reduce the enormous word deficits many children come to school with and at the same time keep the tensions and pressures of high-stakes testing from filtering down to the world of tiny people with Pixar lunchboxes remains one of the most significant and least explored questions around the expansion of prekindergarten. How they will nurture the distinct kind of teaching skill required to execute play-based learning successfully is yet another.

More than 4,000 teachers have received city training for the new road ahead. But it lasted only three days. The Education Department stresses that further coaching and professional development as the year proceeds will be considerable.

Teachers in the kind of classrooms that the administration aspires to build need more than patience and certificates. They need worldliness and quick intellectual reflexes. And they need engagement from parents who may not have had the time to expose their children to as many new experiences as they had hoped. Ms. Fariña says that parents will be regularly invited into classrooms and that their involvement is highly sought after. She recently wrote new parents a letter, she told me. She asked them to have dinner with their children and to talk to them. Because that, in the end, is some of the most important training of all.

-reprinted from The New York Times

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: kindergarten ^[4]

pre-school ^[5]

public management ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/09/prekindergarten-expands-new-york-city-guiding-guided-play>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/09/prekindergarten-expands-new-york-city-guiding-guided-play> [2]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/nyregion/as-prekindergarten-expands-in-new-york-city-guiding-guided-play.html?mcubz=1> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pre-school> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8166>