

Our misguided effort to close the achievement gap is creating a new inequality: The 'play' gap ^[1]

Author: Strauss, Valerie

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EXCERPTS

"Play is the primary engine of human growth. It's universal — as much as walking and talking." That's what Nancy Carlsson-Paige, an early childhood development expert, wrote in this post about just how "twisted" early childhood education that ignores the value of play has become. Classes for young children that concentrate on academics and force kids to sit in chairs and do worksheets for hours on end are harmful — and now, there is a risk that a new "play disparity" between kids from poor and better-to-do families is widening and could be exacerbated by a push for universal pre-kindergarten.

Here's a new post on this issue by Carlsson-Paige, who for decades has been at the forefront of the debate on how best to educate — and not educate — the youngest students. She is a professor emerita of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., where she taught teachers for more than 30 years and was a founder of the university's Center for Peaceable Schools. She is also a founding member and senior adviser of a nonprofit called Defending the Early Years, which commissions research about early childhood education and advocates for sane policies for young children.

Carlsson-Paige is author of "Taking Back Childhood." The mother of two artist sons, Matt and Kyle Damon, she is also the recipient of numerous awards, including the Legacy Award from the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps for work over several decades on behalf of children and families, as well as the Deborah Meier award given by the nonprofit National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

Soon many of our nation's young children will be starting school for the first time. What they will likely find is something dramatically different from what their parents experienced at their age. Kindergartens and pre-K classrooms have changed. There is less play, less art and music, less child choice, more teacher-led instruction, worksheets, and testing than a generation ago. Studies tell us that these changes, although pervasive, are most evident in schools serving high percentages of low-income children of color.

The pressure to teach academic skills in pre-K and kindergarten has been increasing since the passage of the No Child Left Behind act 15 years ago. Today, many young children are required to sit in chairs, sometimes for long periods of time, as a teacher instructs them. This goes against their natural impulse to learn actively through play where they are fully engaged—body, mind, and spirit.

Play is an engine driving children to build ideas, learn skills and develop capacities they need in life. Kids all over the world play and no one has to teach them how. In play children develop problem solving skills, social and emotional awareness, self-regulation, imagination and inner resilience. When kids play with blocks, for example, they build concepts in math and science that provide a solid foundation for later academic learning. No two children play alike; they develop at different rates and their different cultures and life experiences shape their play. But all children learn through play.

Many urban, low-income children have limited play opportunities outside of school, which makes in-school playtime even more vital for them. But what studies now show is that the children who need play the most in the early years of school get the least. Children in more affluent communities have more classroom play time. They have smaller class sizes and more experienced teachers who know how to provide for play-based learning. Children in low income, under-resourced communities have larger class sizes, less well-trained teachers, heavier doses of teacher-led drills and tests, and less play.

We've seen a worrisome trend in recent years showing high rates of suspension from the nation's public preschools. The latest report from the Office for Civil Rights reveals that these suspensions are disproportionately of low-income black boys. (This pattern continues for children in grades K-12.) Something is very wrong when thousands of preschoolers are suspended from school each year. While multiple causes for suspensions exist, one major cause for this age group is play deprivation. Preschool and kindergarten suspensions occur primarily in schools serving low-income, black and brown children and these are the schools with an excess of drill-based instruction and little or no play.

There are many children who simply cannot adapt to the unnatural demands of early academic instruction. They can't suppress their

inborn need to move and create using their bodies and senses. They act out; they get suspended from school, now even from preschool.

There are also impressive numbers of young children who do manage to adapt to overly academic programs. But even for them, this comes at a cost. They lose out on all the benefits of play-based learning. Instead they learn facts and skills by rote practice; they learn that there are right and wrong answers, that the teacher defines what is learned. They learn compliance. They don't get to discover that they can invent new ideas. They don't get to feel the sense of empowerment found in playful learning.

What we now call the "school to prison pipeline" — the pathway that leads many young people from school into the criminal justice system — is embedded in the context of racial and economic injustice that has always shaped our nation's schools. And now, in a misguided effort to close the achievement gap, we are creating a new kind of inequality. In the current education climate, now focused on academics and rigor even in pre-K and kindergarten, economically advantaged children have many more opportunities to play in school than do kids from low-income communities. We are planting the seeds of disengagement for the young children we want to see succeed and stay in school.

Too much education policy has been written by those who don't know how young children develop and learn. As we hear calls for universal pre-K growing louder, policymakers must listen to the knowledge and experience of early childhood professionals. Long-term studies point to lasting gains for children who have quality early childhood programs, especially those that are play-based rather than more academically oriented.

Our public education system is riddled with disparities. Let's not create a new play inequality as we move toward providing greater access to early childhood education for all children.

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