

# THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHILD-DIRECTED ACTIVITIES AND TEACHERS' AUTONOMY FROM MASSACHUSETTS' KINDERGARTENS



*According to a survey of 189 kindergarten teachers in the wealthiest and poorest school districts in Massachusetts, schools have reduced the amount of time that kindergartners have for child-directed activities (CDA) such as free play, rest, recess, snack, and lunch. At the same time, school administrators with limited or no knowledge of early childhood education have placed increasing restrictions on kindergarten teachers' control over curriculum and instruction.*

- Schools have reduced the time kindergartners have for child-directed activities.

- Children in high-socioeconomic status (SES) schools have more time for child-directed activities.

- Kindergartners in Massachusetts get much less time for free play and recess than three provinces in Canada recommend for kindergartners.

- The scheduling of child-directed activities in some low-SES kindergartens is minimal or non-existent.

- Schools have reduced kindergarten teachers' control over curriculum.

- Most elementary principals are inexperienced in early childhood education.

*In far too many public school kindergartens in Massachusetts, children are experiencing educational conditions that prepare them, not for a career in the creative economy, but rather for settings where creativity, personal agency, and a sense of purpose are not necessary. Advocacy is required at both the state and local level to persuade or, if necessary, compel schools to adopt practices that address the needs of children rather than the needs of child-blind administrators in their pursuit of higher test scores.*

### INTRODUCTION

This research brief<sup>1</sup> describes a study that was prompted by conversations I had with two kindergarten teachers in Fall 2016. Although one of these teachers taught in one of the wealthiest districts in the state and the other in one of the poorest, their two primary concerns were identical. First, both complained that they had limited control over the scope and pacing of curriculum in their classrooms because their districts had adopted scripted curricula that teachers were expected to follow faithfully. Consequently, instead of engaging children in meaningful projects that captured children's interest and attention, teachers were required to use the scripted curricula that left some children bored and others frustrated. Although I was fully aware that many low-income school districts had adopted scripted curricula in recent years, I was surprised to learn that one of the wealthiest districts in the state had fully embraced this approach as well.

Second, both teachers complained that their principals had mandated that less time be scheduled daily for child-directed activities (CDA) such as free play, recess, lunch, snack, and rest time. Moreover, further questioning revealed substantial differences between the amount of time scheduled for CDA in the two kindergartens in question: The high socioeconomic status (SES) kindergarten included: 25 minutes for free play, 15 minutes for snack, two 20-minute recesses, a 15-minute rest period, and 25 minutes for lunch. By contrast, the low socioeconomic status (SES) kindergarten allotted no time for free play, snack, or rest, or; 20 minutes for lunch and a 15-minute recess during which children were required to participate in adult-directed activities. Consequently, the high-SES kindergarten had 120 minutes for CDA daily, six times more than the 20 minutes of CDA scheduled (for lunch) for the low-SES kindergarten.

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Disturbed and surprised by these reports from the field, I decided to investigate the issues these teachers had raised by developing a survey that asked kindergarten teachers in Massachusetts working in diverse socio-economic settings about a) the extent of kindergarten teachers' autonomy over curriculum; b) the amount of time that kindergarten children have for free play, lunch, snack, rest, and recess; and c) whether the answers to the preceding questions vary according to school districts' SES. I also investigated two related issues:

1) how the amount of CDA reported in the current survey compares with relevant national or international standards; and 2) the early childhood education credentials of the principals of the schools where survey participants

taught. Prior to describing how the preceding questions were investigated, it is necessary to address the educational importance of child-directed activities and of teacher autonomy.

### The Importance of Child-Directed Activities

Child-directed activities occur in classrooms when children, while still under adult supervision, are largely in charge of what they say, do, and attend to. In early childhood settings, CDA have historically included the following activities: free play, snack, lunch, rest (or nap), and recess. As explained next, CDA are important for two main reasons:

1) in order to maximize academic performance, children need to take frequent breaks from paying attention to teacher-directed activities; and 2) in order to foster spontaneous development of a variety of developmental capacities, children need to have frequent opportunities to engage in self-selected, child-directed activities, especially play.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the many kindergarten teachers who took time from their busy schedules to respond to the current survey. I also want to thank Diane Levin for her many valuable suggestions for improving this manuscript.

## Children Need Frequent Breaks From Teacher-Directed Activities

In order to benefit fully from instruction, children need frequent breaks from teacher-directed tasks, which often require effortful attention. Such breaks are necessary because neither children nor adults are capable of attending to externally assigned tasks for hours at a time. Further, requiring children to pay attention to teacher-assigned tasks for extended periods of time decreases children's motivation to participate in instructional activities and degrades their capacity to retain and consolidate learning.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the recent research into this arena of human functioning has been conducted by neuroscientists who have studied the effect of "downtime," a concept with different meanings for different audiences. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines downtime—a term that emerged from the world of manufacturing—as a "time during which production is stopped especially during setup for an operation or when making repairs."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, in its original sense, downtime is equated with mechanical inactivity, seen as entirely non-productive, and treated as something to be minimized, if not altogether eliminated.

Researchers in the field of cognitive neuroscience, individuals who study brains in bodies not machines in factories, take a different approach to downtime because they have discovered that brains are never idle; rather, brains are always at work, even

when people are asleep.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, for cognitive neuroscientists, downtime refers not to unproductive inactivity but rather to a variety of productive activities that occur when the mind switches away from externally assigned tasks that may often require effortful attention. Indeed, researchers have found that regularly scheduled breaks from activities that require effortful attention are necessary for peak academic performance because "the brain cannot maintain attention for long periods of time ... For information to be processed, down time is needed to recycle chemicals crucial for long-term memory formation."<sup>5</sup>

## Children Need To Engage Frequently in Self-Selected, Child-Directed Activities (CDA)

Beyond providing a restorative respite from externally assigned tasks, the activities discussed here each provide other kinds of important developmental benefits when children direct their attention to CDA. Wakeful rest is associated with default mode processing, a form of mental activity that facilitates the development of social cognition, moral emotions (such as empathy), and creativity.<sup>6</sup> Napping is associated with increased recall and emotional stability.<sup>7</sup> Lunch and snack both provide children with daily opportunities during mealtime conversations to enhance their language development, social skills, and vocabulary. Eating lunch or snack also fulfills, of course, the basic human need for nutrition. (It is important to note, however, that when children have less than 20 minutes

<sup>2</sup>Tokubama-Espinosa, T. (2010). *Mind, brain, and education science: A comprehensive guide to the new brain-based teaching*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.

Willis, J. (2016, December 7). *Using brain breaks to restore students' focus*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/brain-breaks-restore-student-focus-judy-willis>.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/downtime>.

<sup>4</sup>Macdonald, K., Germine, L., Anderson, A., Christodoulou, J. & McGrath, L. M. (2017). *Dispelling the myth: Training in education or neuroscience decreases but does not eliminate beliefs in neuromyths*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1314.

<sup>5</sup>Jarrett, O. S., Maxwell, D. D., Dickerson, C., Hoge, P., Davies, G. & Yetley, A. (1998). *Impact of recess on classroom behavior: Group effects and individual differences*. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92(2), 121-126.

<sup>6</sup>Immordino-Yang, M. H., Christodoulou, J. A., & Singh, V. (2012). *Rest is not idleness: Implications of the brain's default mode for human development and education*. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7(4), 352-364.

<sup>7</sup>Mantua, J., & Spencer, R. M. (in press). *Exploring the nap paradox: Are mid-day sleep bouts a friend or foe?* *Sleep Medicine*.

## Disappearance of Child-Directed Activities

to eat lunch, they eat less food and ingest fewer nutrients.<sup>8</sup>) Recess is the principal form of exercise for approximately 42% of children in the United States. Further, recess restores children's capacity to pay attention in school settings—provided, however, that it is child-directed, not adult-directed.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, child-created and -controlled play is at the heart of children's development and learning. It is associated with mental flexibility, creativity, foundational mathematical knowledge, social competence, self-regulation, turn taking, and many other positive outcomes.<sup>10</sup> As children play with materials that they control and with each other, they are using what they already know to solve problems and constructing new ideas in unique and developmentally meaningful ways. They are learning from each other and building social skills, such as cooperation and negotiation.<sup>11</sup>

It is also important to note that play and recess share a common and valuable characteristic: both are agentive activities that provide children with the opportunity to plan and pursue meaningful goals with a sense of purpose.<sup>12</sup> During free play and recess, children often demonstrate the ability to exert effortful attention for extended periods of time precisely

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because self-selected, child-directed activities are personally meaningful—a phenomenon first noticed by Montessori and later extended by Csikszentmihaly.<sup>13</sup> Children are far less likely,

however, to demonstrate the capacity to pay attention for extended periods of time while engaged in teacher-selected, adult-directed activities that children may often experience as personally meaningless.<sup>14</sup>

To summarize, CDA are important because they provide children with time to engage in spontaneous construction of a host of developmental abilities. Concomitantly, CDA provide children with mentally restorative breaks from externally assigned tasks, breaks that help children fully benefit from appropriate instruction.

### The Importance of Teacher Autonomy

Two of the key ways that teachers have traditionally exercised autonomy in their profession is by selecting, adapting, and implementing curricula that respond to the needs of their students and by planning daily and weekly schedules. Teachers who are provided with high levels of autonomy in these and other areas tend to 1) teach in ways that are consistent with high-performing

<sup>8</sup>Center on Education Policy. (2008). *Instructional time in elementary schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=309>.

<sup>9</sup>American Academy of Pediatrics. (2013). *The crucial role of recess in school*. *Pediatrics*, 131(1), 183-188.

Pellegrini, A. D. & Bohn, C. M. (2005). *The role of recess in children's cognitive performance and school adjustment*. *Educational Researcher*, 34(1), 13-19.

<sup>10</sup>Singer, D. G., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (Eds.). (2006). *Play= Learning: How play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional growth*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup>Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. New York, NY: Alliance for Childhood.

<sup>12</sup>Lee, M. (2015). *Power shift: Play and agency in early childhood*. *Childhood and Philosophy*, 11(22), 241-264.

<sup>13</sup>Montessori, M. (1964). *The Montessori method*. New York, NY: Schocken. (Translation originally published 1912).  
Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>14</sup>Bruya, B. (Ed.). (2010). *Effortless attention: A new perspective in the cognitive science of attention and action*. MIT Press.

schools and 2) produce positive academic outcomes.<sup>15</sup> In addition, teachers with higher levels of autonomy have higher job satisfaction and are less likely to exit the profession.<sup>16</sup>

Research indicates, however, that, with the advent of the accountability movement, teachers have seen their autonomy reduced over the last 15 years.<sup>17</sup> Reduced teacher autonomy is problematic for two principal reasons. First, when reductions in teacher autonomy are due to schools' adoption of scripted curricula,

a veritable trove of scientific research tells us that effective teaching is not standardized and cannot be scripted .... Studies of effective teachers quite consistently portray the nature of effective teaching as complex, and based essentially on appropriate moment-by-moment instructional decision making. (Emphasis added)<sup>18</sup>

Further, as noted earlier, research also tells us that reductions in teacher autonomy are associated with reduced levels of job satisfaction, particularly among highly skilled teachers. For example, when McNeil studied the implementation of scripted curricula in Texas, expert teachers found teaching less satisfying as such curricula left these skilled teachers feeling deskilled. As one magnet school teacher told McNeil,

'I am tired of having to lie to do my work.'<sup>19</sup> McNeil also found that the adoption of scripted curricula had made schools "exceedingly comfortable for mediocre teachers who like to teach routine lessons according to a standard sequence and format, who like working as deskilled laborers not having to think about their work."<sup>20</sup>

To summarize, when teachers are provided with sufficient autonomy to make and implement meaningful decisions about curriculum and instruction that respond to their students' needs, educators are more likely to function as high performing teachers and to remain in the profession. Conversely, when educators' autonomy is reduced, expert teachers are more likely to experience decreased job satisfaction and to even exit the profession.

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<sup>15</sup>Berry, B., & Farris-Berg, K. (2016). *Leadership for teaching and learning: How teacher-powered schools work and why they matter*. *American Educator*, 40(2), 11.

Farris-Berg, K., & Dirkswager, E. J. (2012). *Trusting teachers with school success: What happens when teachers call the shots*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>16</sup>Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). *Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 499-534.

<sup>17</sup>Sparks, D., & Malkus, N. (2015). *Public school teacher autonomy in the classroom across school years 2003-04, 2007-08, and 2011-12*. *Stats in Brief, NCES 2015-089*. National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>18</sup>Allington, R. L. (2002). *Troubling times: A short historical perspective*. *Big brother and the national reading curriculum: How ideology trumped evidence*, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup>McNeil, L. (2002). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 189.

<sup>20</sup>McNeil, L. (2002). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York, NY: Routledge, p. 189.

### Description of the Kindergarten Teacher Survey

I developed a survey with a variety of items designed to investigate the extent of 1) child-directed activities and 2) teacher autonomy in Massachusetts' kindergartens.<sup>21</sup> In Spring 2017, I sent this anonymous survey to 586 randomly selected kindergarten teachers in the 40 most economically advantaged and the 40 most economically disadvantaged communities and districts in the state.<sup>22</sup> A total of 189 teachers (32% of the individuals contacted) responded: 112 from low-SES districts, and 77 from high-SES districts, seven of whom taught in half-day kindergartens. The findings reported below refer, however, to the responses of full-day kindergarten teachers only.

## RESULTS

### Teachers' Autonomy

High percentages of both low- and high-socioeconomic status (SES) kindergarten teachers indicated that their districts had adopted prescribed curricula: approximately 50% had scripted programs in mathematics and writing and 60% in phonics/spelling. Even higher percentages of teachers, approximately 65%, reported that their school allowed "no adaptations" or "minor adaptations" to their school's curricula—scripted or otherwise—in writing, mathematics, and phonics. There was, however, a substantial difference with regard to reading instruction: 74% of low-SES as opposed to 55% of high-SES teachers had limited freedom to adapt their reading curriculum.

Approximately 30% of teachers in high- and low-SES districts indicated that they had "far too little time" to "reflect on and adapt" their teaching. Finally,

teachers in both types of districts reported scheduling, on their own, downtime activities such as mindfulness and yoga (approximately 38% and 20% respectively); however, higher percentages of teachers in high-SES schools reported scheduling brain breaks (70% versus 39%).

### Time Scheduled for Child-Directed Activities

High percentages of teachers from high- and low-SES districts, 74% and 64% respectively, reported that their schools had reduced the amount of time scheduled for child-directed activities (CDA) in recent years. There were substantial and often vast differences, however, regarding almost all other aspects of school-scheduled CDA.

High-SES kindergartens scheduled 30 minutes more daily, two and a half hours more weekly, for child-directed activities than low-SES kindergartens. Higher percentages of low-SES kindergartens scheduled no time for either rest (78% versus 52%) or snack (21% versus 0%), and less than 20 minutes for lunch (12% versus 0%). High-SES kindergartens scheduled 20 more minutes daily, 100 more minutes weekly, for play and recess combined. (See Table 1.) Far higher percentages of teachers in low-SES kindergartens reported that their schools schedule "too little time" or "far too little time" for recess (73% versus 51%), snack (47% versus 34%), lunch (51% versus 15%), and rest (79% versus 35%).

Kindergartens in low-SES districts were more likely to have transformed child-directed activities into adult-directed activities. Compared with kindergartens in high-SES districts, low-SES kindergartens were more likely to have a working snack (23% versus 3%), an adult-guided recess (6% versus 3%), and, as an occasional form of punishment, a silent lunch (10% versus 0%).

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<sup>21</sup>To request a copy of this survey, contact [rfowler@salemstate.edu](mailto:rfowler@salemstate.edu).

<sup>22</sup>Measures of economic advantage were based on 1) rankings of cities and towns' per capita income, based on the US Census and 2) measures of school districts' "economic disadvantage" that are reported in the state education agency's database of school and district profiles, located at <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>.

Further analysis uncovered two other striking findings. First, kindergarteners in 16 low-income schools, located in nine school districts, had fewer minutes of CDA per hour in their typical school day than the 7.1 minutes of break time per hour that Massachusetts school custodians have in their typical work day. (A typical union contract has an 8.5-hour workday, a 30-minute lunch period, and two 15-minute breaks, or a full hour of break time from work per day.) Second, kindergarteners in two low-SES schools in MA did not have a single minute for CDA on days when silent lunch, working snack, and adult-directed recess are implemented.

Having just highlighted the disproportionate scheduling of CDA in low-SES schools, it is important to note that, as reported earlier, a substantial percentage of teachers in high-SES districts say that their children get “too little time” or “far too little time” for recess (51%), rest (35%), snack (34%) and lunch (15%); and that 55% of high SES kindergartens do not have a rest period. And it is equally important to note that some low-income schools scheduled comparatively high amounts of CDA. Indeed, six of the nine kindergartens with the highest amount of total CDA were located in low-income communities. Finally, the 15 low-income classrooms that were NAEYC-accredited<sup>23</sup> had 23% more total time for CDA than the low-income kindergartens that were not NAEYC-accredited. (See Appendix A for a table of selected findings from the current survey, disaggregated by SES.)

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## Comparing the Time Scheduled for CDA in MA Kindergartens with Other Standards

Even though American education is currently replete with standards of all kinds, there are, unfortunately, no nationally recognized standards for the amount of time that kindergartens should schedule daily for CDA as a whole. There are, however, other ways to identify standards or models for kindergarten scheduling.

First, seven states have issued early learning policy recommendations that include examples of full-day kindergarten schedules.<sup>24</sup> When averaged, these seven states recommend that kindergarteners get just one minute less daily for CDA than the high-SES and 29 minutes more daily than the low-SES kindergartens surveyed here.

Second, three Canadian provinces have also produced sample kindergarten schedules, and these recommendations vary dramatically from what occurs in Massachusetts.<sup>25</sup> The Canadian scheduling recommendations provide children with 1) 50 more minutes of CDA daily and 4.2 more hours weekly, than in high-SES schools in MA and, 2) 80 more minutes of CDA daily and 6.7 more hours weekly, than in low-SES schools in MA. (See Table 1.)

Further, the three provinces in Canada, a country that far outperforms the USA on international tests, recommend that children have, on average of 8.3 hours per week for play and recess combined. By contrast, high- and low-SES kindergartens in MA schedule, respectively, have only 5.2 and 3.5 hours weekly for play and recess.

<sup>23</sup>NAEYC accredited programs have met high quality early childhood program standards designed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

<sup>24</sup>The states with sample full-day kindergarten schedules are Arizona, Kansas, North Carolina, New Jersey, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

<sup>25</sup>The three Canadian provinces with sample full-day kindergarten schedules are British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario.

**Table 1**

**Amount of Time Scheduled for Child-Directed Activities (CDA) in MA Kindergartens  
And Recommended Amounts of CDA in State and Provincial Kindergarten Guidelines**

Type of Activity	Mean Amount of CDA in MA Kindergartens				Mean Amount of CDA in Kindergarten Scheduling of Guidelines			
	Low-SES		High-SES		American States		Canadian Provinces	
	Minutes	Hours	Minutes	Hours	Minutes	Hours	Minutes	Hours
	Daily	Weekly	Daily	Weekly	Daily	Weekly	Daily	Weekly
Lunch	24	2.0	26	2.2	29	2.4	36	3.0
Snack	11	0.9	16	1.3	14	1.2	20	1.7
Recess	22	1.8	32	2.6	32	2.7	49	4.1
Rest	5	0.4	8	0.7	13	1.1	7	0.6
Free Play	20	1.7	30	2.5	23	1.9	50	4.2
Total	82	6.8	112	9.3	111	9.3	162	13.6

Third, researchers have also investigated another factor that informs the current discussion: the relationship between downtime and peak performance in both workplace and school settings. Recently, Gifford reported that one company’s top adult performers did not work longer hours than less productive workers. In fact, the top performers worked less than a full eight hours, because they took, on average, a 17-minute break following 52 minutes of work, which amounts to 15 minutes of downtime per hour.<sup>26</sup> Concurrently, Dr. Judith Willis, who is both a neuroscientist and a classroom teacher, recommends, based on her review of downtime research, that elementary students in grades 1-6 should also have 15 minutes of downtime for every hour of work (preferably broken into work sessions of 10 to 15 minutes followed by 3- to 5-minute breaks).<sup>27</sup> In the current study, though, 71% of kindergarten classrooms in low-SES and 23% in high-SES districts

get less downtime per hour (as measured by the amount of time scheduled for CDA) than Willis recommends for sixth-graders and Gifford recommends for adults. Thus, the discrepancy in downtime for kindergartners in low-SES and high-SES districts is important to note.

Finally, the American Academy of Pediatrics, based on its analysis of research on the length and timing of school lunch, recommends that, once seated, children have at least 20 minutes to eat and therefore encourages schools to schedule at least 25 and preferably 30 minutes for lunch.<sup>28</sup> The current study found, however, that low-SES kindergartens were more likely than high-SES kindergartens to have lunch periods that lasted less than 20 minutes (12% versus 0%) and less than 25 minutes (39% versus 24%). Further, approximately 50% of both types of kindergartens fail to follow a related recommendation for schools to schedule lunch before (not after) recess.

<sup>26</sup>Gifford, J. (2014, August 7). *The rule of 52 and 17: It's random, but it ups your productivity*. *The Muse*. Retrieved from <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-rule-of-52-and-17-its-random-but-it-ups-your-productivity>.

<sup>27</sup>Willis, J. (2016, December 7). *Using brain breaks to restore students' focus*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/brain-breaks-restore-student-focus-judy-willis>.

8 <sup>28</sup>Turner, L., Eliason, M., Sandoval, A. & Chaloupka, F. (2014). *Most US public elementary schools provide students only minimal time to eat lunch*. *Bridging the Gap Program*, Health Policy Center, Institute for Health Research and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago.



## The Early Childhood Credentials of Survey Participants' Principals

Given the fact that principals typically set the policies regarding both instructional and non-instructional time in all the classrooms in their school, it is important to know whether the heads of the schools in this study had any training in early childhood teaching practices. To pursue this question, I investigated the early childhood credentials of survey participants' principals by 1) identifying the name of the principal of each participating teacher's school, and 2) searching for each principal's credentials on the state's Public Lookup for Educator Licensure.<sup>29</sup> This search found that low percentages of responding teachers' principals held a state-issued early childhood education (PreK-2) teaching credential in both low- and high-SES districts, 20% versus 16% respectively. Principals in low-SES schools, however, were far more likely to hold neither an early childhood nor an elementary credential (38% versus 22%).

### DISCUSSION

The current results reveal a similar trend in both high- and low-SES kindergartens: widespread use of scripted curricula and small amounts of time for CDA. Such practices suggest a deep distrust of children and teachers' agency, of their capacity to have and act on their own thoughts. The implicit message of such practices, which suggest ignorance of the educational benefits associated with both teacher autonomy and

with well-planned and guided CDA, is the proposition that crucial decisions about how teachers and children should spend their time are best made by individuals outside the classroom (e.g., principals, superintendents, and publishers).

Use of scripted curriculum is, of course, not new to American education. Indeed, in the 1970s and early 1980s, scripted programs were not uncommon. What is new, however, is 1) the extent to which scripted curricula have been adopted in so many subject areas, 2) the restrictions placed on teachers' ability to adapt such curricula, and 3) the overall reduction of CDA in children's daily schedules, as free play, lunch, rest, recess, and snack time are reduced, eliminated, and/or transformed into adult-directed activities.<sup>30</sup>

In the past, educators have perennially debated the extent to which instruction should be child-centered or teacher-centered, and educational practices have historically shifted between these two poles. However, now that the age of testing has come to maturity—an effort driven by and modeled on corporate-based interests and ideologies<sup>31</sup>—many schools have adopted an approach to instruction and scheduling that, as detailed in the current study, is neither child- nor teacher-centered but rather administrator-centered. As a result, teachers are increasingly reflecting less on the extent to which they should lead or follow the child, and more on the extent to which they should follow or deviate from principal-mandated schedules and district-mandated curricula.

***Principals in low-SES schools, however, were far more likely to hold neither an early childhood nor an elementary credential.***

<sup>29</sup>The MA educator lookup is located at: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/educators/lookup/>.

<sup>30</sup>Cook, G. (2004). Good-bye to nap time: Spurred by NCLB, elementary schools get serious. *American School Board Journal*, 191(5), 6-8.

*Fair Test*. (2004). No time for recess; no need for nap. *Fair Test Newsletter*. Retrieved from <https://www.fairtest.org/no-time-recess-no-need-nap>.

Leavenworth, J. (2005, October 22). Compromise reached on snack time: Some parents still upset over kindergarten policy. *Hartford Courant*. Retrieved from [http://articles.courant.com/2005-10-22/news/0510220782\\_1\\_snack-foods-kindergarten-teachers-school-board](http://articles.courant.com/2005-10-22/news/0510220782_1_snack-foods-kindergarten-teachers-school-board).

Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. New York, NY: Alliance for Childhood.

<sup>31</sup>Karp, S. (2012). Challenging corporate ed reform. *Rethinking Schools*, 26(3).

## Disappearance of Child-Directed Activities

Among the many problems associated with administrator-directed instruction, besides the obvious fact that administrators are not in the classroom as curriculum is enacted, is the fact that most elementary principals in the nation have little or no knowledge of early childhood education.<sup>32</sup> It is not surprising therefore that the current study found that more than 80% of responding teachers' principals do not hold an early childhood credential. Indeed, principals' lack of knowledge of early instructional practices is painfully evident in some of the scheduling practices described here: kindergartens that do not have time for free play, rest, or unstructured snack but do have carefully dictated amounts of time for working snacks, adult-guided recesses, and silent lunches. Ideas implicit in such scheduling practices are the following toxic misconceptions about children's learning: 1) child-directed activities are a waste of time that could be used for more important "learning" purposes; and 2) children can and should pay attention to adults for extended periods of time.

Principals who ascribe, explicitly or not, to the preceding wrongheaded ideas about how young children learn are best described as suffering from child-blindness. One of the teachers who responded to the current survey captured this notion when she commented that her principal does not see kindergarteners as "children" but only as "data points."

The current results clearly indicate, however, that the full weight of educational practices mandated

by child-blind administrators falls most heavily on kindergarteners in low-income communities where, as noted earlier, 71% of low-SES kindergarteners have less time for child-directed activities than the amount of downtime that Gifford recommends for peak performance by adults.<sup>33</sup> And yet kindergarteners in low-SES schools presumably need more time for restorative breaks than peers in high-SES schools—not to mention adults in the workplace—to 1) rebound from stressors associated with poverty and, in many instances, 2) manage the cognitive demands of being educated in a second language.

The reason why principals of low-SES schools adopt the Dickensian scheduling practices identified here is, presumably, to prepare children to be college and career ready. It is important to ask, however, what type of future setting low-SES kindergarteners are being prepared for when they are not permitted to eat a snack, talk during lunch, play freely during recess, or rest when tired; and when they get 100 minutes less time weekly than high-SES kindergarteners to engage in the activities of free play and recess. Such practices surely do not constitute preparation for a career at Google, which has nap pods for its workers; or at Intel, where workers get three major breaks a day along with two 5- to 10-minute breaks daily; or at 3M, where employees have been allowed, since 1948, to devote 15% of their workday to projects of their own choice.<sup>34</sup> Nor do these practices prepare children for any college that I am aware of.

*in far too many low-SES kindergartens in Massachusetts, children are being prepared, intentionally or not, for workplaces and institutions where personal agency and a sense of purpose are not necessary*

<sup>32</sup>Fowler, R.C. (2017, April). *Early childhood credentials held by K-3 teachers and elementary principals in five states*. Poster session presented at the meeting of the AERA, San Diego, CA.

Mead, S. (2011). *PreK-3rd: Principals as crucial instructional leaders*. Foundation for Child Development, (7).

<sup>33</sup>Gifford, J. (2014, August 7). *The rule of 52 and 17: It's random, but it ups your productivity*. *The Muse*. Retrieved from <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-rule-of-52-and-17-its-random-but-it-ups-your-productivity>.

<sup>34</sup>CBS News. (2013, January 22). *Inside Google workplaces, from perks to nap pods*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/inside-google-workplaces-from-perks-to-nap-pods/>.

Coleman, J. & Coleman, J. (2012, December 6). *The upside of downtime*. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2012/12/the-upside-of-downtime>.

Waite-Stupiansky, S., & Findlay, M. (2002). *The fourth R: Recess and its link to learning*. *The Educational Forum*, 66(1), 16-25.

Given that no research supports the educational value of such instructional practices, an unavoidable conclusion is that, in far too many low-SES kindergartens in Massachusetts, children are being prepared, intentionally or not, for workplaces and institutions where personal agency and a sense of purpose are not necessary. And the two kindergartens where children may have zero minutes of child-directed activities during the school day appear to be preparing children, intentionally or not, for institutionalization only. Ultimately, such practices appear to be designed not to redress but rather to reproduce social inequities.

In closing, it is important to note that some groups in higher SES communities have initiated efforts to address some of the issues discussed in this paper. Parents in Hopkinton, MA successfully lobbied the school committee to add a second recess to their school day.<sup>35</sup> Educators in Acton have initiated a town-wide effort to provide more time for children to have play and outdoor activity in school and at home.<sup>36</sup> The Massachusetts legislature is currently considering legislation to require a minimum of 30 minutes of recess in the school day.<sup>37</sup> And, as noted earlier, a number of high- and low-SES schools have adopted kindergarten schedules that provide children with ample amounts of free play and recess.

Further advocacy is required at both the local and state level, though, to persuade or, if necessary,

compel more schools in Massachusetts to adopt practices that address the needs of the whole child rather than the needs of child-blind administrators for higher test scores. Concurrently, efforts need to be undertaken to educate both policy makers and school administrators about the fact that countries with educational systems that value and encourage playful learning and child-directed activities in kindergarten (e.g., Finland, Singapore, and Canada) far outperform the United States on international assessments.<sup>38</sup> For example, Singapore, the country that leads all nations in all three subject areas tested by the PISA assessments (i.e., math, science, and reading), has devised an early educational system that seeks to produce, by the end of kindergarten, “a happy and healthy child who is able

***It is time for policy makers and administrators in Massachusetts and across the nation to heed this lesson: to cease treating children as data points, and to design responsive educational environments, led by empowered early educators, that nurture the whole child.***

to relate to others, communicate with others, and is curious and enthusiastic about learning.”<sup>39</sup> (See Appendix B for a list of Singapore’s eight desired kindergarten outcomes.) Singapore illustrates how an ethnically diverse society that embraces early childhood education as a preparation for life-long learning, and not as a preparation for test taking, can produce outstanding educational outcomes. It is time for policy makers and administrators in Massachusetts and across the nation to heed this lesson: to cease treating children as data points, and to design responsive educational environments, led by empowered early educators, that nurture the whole child.

<sup>35</sup>Lefferts, J.F. (April 12, 2017). *More towns tell students: It's time to play*. *Boston Globe*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/west/2017/04/12/time-play-parents-lobby-for-more-school-recess/XekCFxWlSp2Q3LPm7u827M/story.html>.

<sup>36</sup>Gibowicz, J. & Bookis, D. (2016). *Ready to learn: Research and development 2015-2016*. Acton-Boxborough Public Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.abschools.org/departments/curriculum>.

<sup>37</sup>Vaznis, J. (2017, October 16). *Taking seriously the lessons from recess*. *Boston Globe*, A1, A8.

<sup>38</sup>Jackson, A. & Kiersz, A. (2016, December 6). *The latest ranking of top countries in math, reading, and science is out—and the US didn't crack the top 10*. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from: <http://www.businessinsider.com/pisa-worldwide-ranking-of-math-science-reading-skills-2016-12>.

<sup>39</sup>Ting, T.C. (2007). *Policy developments in pre-school education in Singapore: A focus on the key reforms of kindergarten education*. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 1(1), 35-43.

## Disappearance of Child-Directed Activities

### Appendix A

#### Selected Findings From The Current Survey of MA Kindergarten Teachers, Disaggregated by Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Characteristic	High-SES Ks	Low-SES Ks	Difference (High-SES Minus Low- SES)
Class size	19	21	(2)
Ks that reduced time for child-directed activities (CDA) in recent years	74%	64%	10%
Total time scheduled weekly for CDA (i.e., for play, rest, recess, lunch, and snack)	9.3 hours	6.8 hours	2.5 hours
Time scheduled weekly for recess and free play, combined	4.8 hours	3.2 hours	1.6 hours
Ks with:			
Adult-directed recess	3%	6%	(3%)
Working snack	3%	23%	(20%)
Silent lunch	0%	10%	(10%)
Ks where children have less time for CDA than most custodians have for contractual breaks (i.e., 7 minutes per hour or less)	2%	14%	(12%)
Ks where children have less than 15 minutes of CDA per hour	23%	71%	(48%)
Schools with a principal with an early childhood (PreK-2) credential	16%	20%	(4%)
% of K teachers who say their students have “too little time” or “far too little time” for:			
Recess	51%	73%	(22%)
Snack	34%	47%	(13%)
Lunch	15%	51%	(36%)
Rest	35%	79%	(44%)

Characteristic	High-SES Ks	Low-SES Ks	Difference (High-SES Minus Low-SES)
Ks with a lunch period less than:			
20 minutes	0%	12%	(12%)
25 minutes	24%	34%	(10%)
Characteristic	High-SES Ks	Low-SES Ks	Difference (High-SES Minus Low-SES)
Ks with no time scheduled for:			
Rest	52%	78%	(26%)
Free Play	3%	33%	(30%)
Snack	0%	21%	(21%)
Ks with:			
Literacy area with books	100%	98%	2%
Block area	97%	82%	15%
Listening area	80%	66%	14%
Water or sand table	69%	52%	17%
Writing center	83%	82%	1%
Art area	85%	64%	21%
Math area with manipulatives	95%	92%	3%
Dramatic play area	92%	71%	21%
Science area	71%	46%	25%
Puzzle area	90%	74%	16%
Teachers who, on their own, schedule the following types of breaks:			
Mindfulness	40%	35%	5%
Brain breaks	70%	39%	31%
Yoga	21%	19%	2%
Teachers who have “far too little time” to:			
Confer with colleagues	25%	22%	03%
Relax and destress	55%	54%	01%
Reflect on adapt their instruction	36%	29%	07%
Communicate with families	15%	24%	(09%)

## Appendix B

### Eight Desired Outcomes Singapore Seeks to Instill in Children By The End of Kindergarten

1. Know what is right and what is wrong
2. Be willing to share and take turns with others
3. Be able to relate to others
4. Be curious and able to explore
5. Be able to listen and speak with understanding
6. Be comfortable and happy with themselves
7. Have developed physical co-ordination and healthy habits
8. Love their families, friends, teachers and school

Source: Ting, T.C. (2007). Policy developments in pre-school education in Singapore: A focus on the key reforms of kindergarten education. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 1(1), 35-43.

**TEACHERS SPEAK OUT:**  
HOW SCHOOL REFORMS ARE FAILING LOW-INCOME YOUNG CHILDREN

SOON AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION of federal and state early education mandates that require the teaching and testing of non-formal "academic" skills, many highly experienced early childhood teachers began voicing concerns about the negative impact the mandates were having on the young children in their classrooms. Many of these concerns focused on children from low-income homes—the very children the mandates were most supposed to help.

The report documents what highly experienced and well-trained teachers in several states said to university-based low school reform advocates and learning low-income young children, their families, their programs and themselves. The responses reveal that the mandates—and the top-down manner in which they have been implemented—disregard teachers' knowledge of child development, culturally appropriate practice, and how to meet the diverse educational needs of young children.

Teachers of Low-Income Young Children Say the Mandated Basic Skills Teaching and Testing Are Having a Negative Impact on:

- Teachers' ability to use developmentally and culturally appropriate practices that meet the diverse needs their children bring to the classroom.
- Children's overall development and learning.
- Children's overall behavior and general wellbeing.
- Children's attitudes about learning and school.
- Children's families and home lives.
- Teachers, their colleagues, and the teaching profession.

Many teachers who were confronted with a professed educational "mandate" of promoting a program that will do the "best good" for their children, they must now try to find ways to do the "best best."

Based on current knowledge of appropriate practice in the early childhood field, and the experiences voiced by the teachers interviewed, this report includes with recommendations for how to better meet the needs of all young children in early childhood settings, especially those from low-income homes.

REPORT AUTHORS:  
DIANE E. LEVIN, Ph.D. & JUSTIN L. VAN HORN, Ph.D.

**Teachers Speak Out: How School Reforms Are Failing Low-Income Young Children**

**DEY**  
Defending the Early Years

**STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT KINDERGARTEN READINESS ASSESSMENT**

- What is kindergarten readiness assessment?
- Why is DEY concerned about the current state of readiness assessment?
- What can parents, teachers, and policymakers do about inappropriate kindergarten assessment?

by Stephanie Feeney, Ph.D.  
Professor Emerita of Education  
University of Hawaii

**Straight Talk About Kindergarten Readiness Assessment**

**SELECTED STANDARDS FROM THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR MATHEMATICS, GRADES K-3: MY REASONS FOR NOT SUPPORTING THEM**

**CONSTANCE KAMII**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

**DEY**  
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**Selected Standards From The Common Core State Standards For Mathematics, Grades K-3: My Reasons For Not Supporting Them**

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**Lively Minds:**  
Distinctions between academic versus intellectual goals for young children

Lissa G. Tom, Ph.D.  
University of Illinois  
Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting

**Lively Minds: Distinctions Between Academic Versus Intellectual Goals For Young Children**

**READING INSTRUCTION IN KINDERGARTEN: LITTLE TO GAIN AND MUCH TO LOSE**

IN THE UNITED STATES THERE IS A WIDESPREAD BELIEF THAT TEACHING CHILDREN TO READ EARLY — IN KINDERGARTEN OR EVEN PRE-KINDERGARTEN — WILL HELP THEM BE BETTER READERS IN THE LONG RUN. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE IS NO SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE THAT THIS IS SO. HOW THEN DID THIS IDEA TAKE HOLD SO STRONGLY?

- ▶ Many children are not developmentally ready to read in kindergarten, yet the Common Core State Standards require them to do just that. This is leading to inappropriate classroom practices.
- ▶ No research documents long-term gains from learning to read in kindergarten.
- ▶ Research shows greater gains from play-based programs than from preschools and kindergartens with a more academic focus.
- ▶ Children learn through playful, hands-on experiences with materials, the natural world, and engaging, caring adults.
- ▶ Active, play-based experiences in language-rich environments help children develop their ideas about symbols, oral language and the printed word — all vital components of reading.
- ▶ We are setting unrealistic reading goals and frequently using inappropriate methods to accomplish them.
- ▶ In play-based kindergartens and preschools, teachers intentionally design language and literacy experiences which help prepare children to become fluent readers.
- ▶ The adoption of the Common Core State Standards falsely implies that having children achieve these standards will overcome the impact of poverty on development and learning, and will create equal educational opportunity for all children.

DEY  
Office for Childhood

Report Authors:  
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Joan Wolfheimer Alton

**Reading Instruction In Kindergarten: Little To Gain And Much To Lose**

See the Defending the Early Years website ([www.DEYproject.org](http://www.DEYproject.org)) for additional resources.

*Children need to have frequent opportunities to engage in self-selected, child-directed activities, especially play.*



*In far too many low-SES kindergartens in Massachusetts, children are being prepared, intentionally or not, for workplaces and institutions where personal agency and a sense of purpose are not necessary.*

*It is time for policy makers and administrators in Massachusetts and across the nation to heed this lesson: to cease treating children as data points, and to design responsive educational environments, led by empowered early educators, that nurture the whole child.*

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**Defending the Early Years (DEY)** was founded in 2012 to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. DEY is committed to promoting appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and supporting educators in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices. DEY is a non-profit project of the Progressive Education Network, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 organization.

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