Universal pre-kindergarten education finally seems to be gathering momentum. President Obama highlighted the issue in his 2013 State of the Union address and then mentioned it again in this year’s. Numerous states and cities are launching or expanding early-education initiatives, and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has made this his signature issue. Disagreements persist about the details of funding, but a real consensus has begun to develop that all young children deserve what has until now been unaffordable by low-income families.

But here’s the catch: Very few people are talking about the kind of education that would be offered — other than declaring it should be “high quality.” And that phrase is often interpreted to mean “high intensity”: an accelerated version of skills-based teaching that most early-childhood experts regard as terrible. Poor children, as usual, tend to get the worst of this.

It doesn’t bode well that many supporters of universal pre-K seem to
be more concerned about economic imperatives than about what’s good for kids. In his speech last year, for example, the president introduced the topic by emphasizing the need to “start at the earliest possible age” to “equip our citizens with the skills and training” they’ll need in the workplace.[1] The New York Times, meanwhile, editorialized recently about how we must “tightly integrate the [pre-K] program with kindergarten through third grade so that 4-year-olds do not lose their momentum. It will have to prepare children well for the rigorous Common Core learning standards that promise to bring their math, science and literacy skills up to international norms.”[2]

The top-down, test-driven regimen of Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” and Obama’s “Race to the Top” initiatives in K-12 education is now in the process of being nationalized with those Common Core standards championed by the Times — an enterprise largely funded, and relentlessly promoted, by corporate groups.[3] That same version of school reform, driven by an emphasis on global competitiveness and a determination to teach future workers as much as possible as soon as possible, would now be expanded to children who are barely out of diapers.

That doesn’t leave much time for play.[4] But even to the extent we want to promote meaningful learning in young children, the methods are likely to be counterproductive, featuring an emphasis on the direct instruction of skills and rote rehearsal of facts. This is the legacy of behaviorism: Children are treated as passive receptacles of knowledge, with few opportunities to investigate topics and pose questions that they find intriguing. In place of discovery and exploration, tots are trained to sit still and listen, to memorize lists of letters, numbers, and colors. Their success or failure is relentlessly monitored and quantified, and they’re “reinforced” with stickers or praise for producing right answers and being compliant.

This dreary version of early-childhood education isn’t just disrespectful of children; decades of research show it simply doesn’t work well — and may even be damaging.[5] The same approach
has long been over-represented in schools that serve low-income African-American and Latino children; indeed, it was described by the late Martin Haberman as the “pedagogy of poverty” and it continues to find favor in inner-city charter schools.[6] If we’re not careful, calls to expand access to preschool will result in more of the same for younger children whose families can’t afford an alternative.

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Consider the basic equity argument. Proponents of universal pre-K cite research about the importance of early-life experiences, arguing that children in low-income families are at a real disadvantage in terms of intellectual stimulation, exposure to literacy, and so on. That disadvantage, they point out, can reverberate throughout their lives and is extremely difficult to reverse.

It is true that, on average, children in affluent homes hear more words spoken and have more books read to them. But, as Richard Rothstein points out, it’s not just a matter of the number of words or books to which they’re exposed so much as the context in which they’re presented. “How parents read to children is as important as whether they do, and an extensive literature confirms that more educated parents read aloud differently.” Rather than “sound[ing] out words or nam[ing] letters,” these parents are more likely to “ask questions that are creative, interpretive, or connective, such as, ‘What do you think will happen next?’ ‘Does that remind you of what we did yesterday?’ Middle-class parents are more likely to read aloud to have fun, to have conversations, or as an entree to the world outside. Their children learn that reading is enjoyable.”[7]

To oversimplify a bit, the homes of advantaged parents look more like progressive schools, while the homes of disadvantaged parents look more like back-to-basics, skills-oriented, traditional schools. It makes no sense to try to send low-income children to preschools that intensify the latter approach, with rigorous drilling in letter-sound correspondences and number recognition – the sort of instruction that turns learning into drudgery. As Deborah Stipek,
dean of Stanford’s School of Education, once commented, drill-and-skill instruction isn’t how middle-class children got their edge, so “why use a strategy to help poor kids catch up that didn’t help middle class kids in the first place?”[8]

Alas, that is precisely the strategy that tends to follow in the wake of goals offered by most politicians and journalists who hold forth on education. If schooling is conceived as mostly an opportunity to train tomorrow’s employees, there’s a tendency to look to behaviorist methods – despite the fact that behaviorism has largely been discredited by experts in child development, cognition, and learning.

Lilian Katz, a leading authority in early-childhood education, once observed that we tend to “overestimate children academically and underestimate them intellectually.”[9] This is why a school that is exceedingly “rigorous” can also be wholly unengaging, even sterile. If those who favor prescriptive standards and high-stakes testing equate rigor with quality, it may be because they fail to distinguish between what is intellectual and what is merely academic. The rarity of rich intellectual environments for young children seems to leave only two possibilities, as Katz sees it: Either they spend their time “making individual macaroni collages” or they’re put to work to satisfy “our quick-fix academic fervor.”[10]

Happily, these do not exhaust the possibilities for early-childhood education. One alternative is sketched out in a wonderful book by Katz and her Canadian colleague Sylvia Chard called “Engaging Children’s Minds: The Project Approach.” Here, teachers create extended studies of rich themes that resonate with young children, such as babies, hospitals, or the weather. Children might spend a month learning about such a real-life topic, visiting, drawing, discussing, thinking.

And there are other, overlapping educational models, including two with Italian roots: Montessori education and the Reggio Emilia approach, where “young children are not marched or hurried
sequentially from one different activity to the next, but instead encouraged to repeat key experiences, observe and re-observe, consider and reconsider, represent and re-represent.”[11] Educators who have been influenced by Jean Piaget’s discoveries about child development, meanwhile, have built on his recognition that children are active meaning makers who learn by constructing reality – intellectually, socially, and morally. One of my favorite practical resources in this vein for early-childhood educators is “Moral Classrooms, Moral Children” by the late Rheta DeVries and Betty Zan.

All of these approaches to educating young children offer opportunities to learn that are holistic and situated in a context. They take kids (and their questions) seriously, engage them as thinkers, and give them some say about what they’re doing. The trouble is that current calls for “high-quality” universal pre-K are unlikely to produce learning opportunities that look anything like this – unless political activists begin to educate themselves about the nuances of education.

NOTES

1. See www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address.

2. See www.nytimes.com/2014/01/21/opinion/pre-k-on-the-starting-blocks.html.

3. Some sample headlines in Education Week over the last year: “Business Executives Push Common Core Hard,” “Business Groups Crank Up Defense of Common Core,” “Chamber [of Commerce] President Calls for Support of Common Core in 2014.” In 2009, Bill Gates defended the Common Core, a significant proportion of whose start-up costs have been paid by his foundation, for its capacity to eventually produce a “uniform base of customers.” (See http://ow.ly/pxALx.)

4. Note I say “for play” – not “for opportunities to learn by playing.” The point of play is that it has no point, and children deserve the opportunity to engage in it even if it doesn’t teach skills or anything else.
See http://ow.ly/ta2uT.

5. Alfie Kohn, “Early Childhood Education: The Case Against Direct Instruction of Academic Skills.” Excerpted from The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and “Tougher Standards” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), and available at Early Childhood Education.

6. Alfie Kohn, “Poor Teaching for Poor Children…in the Name of Reform,” Education Week, April 27, 2011. Available at Poor Teaching for Poor Children … in the Name of Reform.


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