

Keeping Learning Alive: No Child Left Behind

Guest editorial

by Shiela Rector

The child moves into the block area. At first he stands and watches two of his classmates as they work together to build a tower. As the tower gets taller and taller, the anticipation of a collapse builds visibly within the children. Finally, with the *one too many* block, the tower falls to the “whoas” of the children.

He moves closer to the pile of fallen blocks and makes appreciative remarks. His hands reach for a block; and he begins to rebuild with his peers, creating a better design, experimenting with balance and architectural stability, designing symmetry and beauty into their creations.

ment of a tadpole. “I think it’s already at stage four.” “No, that one is more like stage three.” They discuss and negotiate, making arguments for their cases, predicting how long it will be until the tails disappear altogether.

In this classroom, children are constructing their knowledge from real life experiences. Instead of completing a worksheet on tadpoles, or listening to a lecture on symmetry and balance, children are experiencing these things in a personal, meaningful way. And the knowledge, the deep understanding seeps into them until they want the vocabulary and language to be able to explain to others what they are seeing and experiencing.

I have a firm belief in developmentally appropriate practices. My training and 20-plus years of experience tell me that allowing children to explore and experience learning in real life ways brings that deep understanding. Last year, I conducted an action research project in my kindergarten classroom to look at the effect that developmentally appropriate centers had on my students’ learning. Could I show that children in language-rich, child-directed activities could succeed as well as children who were spending the majority of their day in lecture, drill, and worksheet activities?

I have taught kindergarten in a public school for the last 13 years. For many of those years, I had the advantage of allowing children to learn at a relaxed pace. While we had some general standards for kindergarten expectations, the focus was on socializing children to the school environment and helping them to develop pre-reading and math skills. This left a lot of room for children to develop naturally, and any children deemed not ready for first grade were likely to be socially immature, not academically behind.

Within the last few years, testing has reached the kindergarten children. Now my district assesses children in the fall and spring and results are collected and analyzed. Kindergarten teachers have clear standards of what children should be able to do in the area of reading, writing, and math. And yes, five year olds can be deemed as failing to meet the standard. While I see some benefits to clear expectations for both students and teachers, I am concerned that the tendency in the face of these changes is to conduct more drill activities, do more worksheets, and press children to perform on tasks that in some cases they are not ready for and, in the long run, will hinder their success in school as they label themselves failures before they even start.

Shiela Rector has been a kindergarten teacher in the Newberg School District in Newberg, Oregon for



13 years. She taught at the Head Start Program for seven years prior to working in public schools. With an undergraduate degree from Linfield College, she completed her master’s degree at Portland State University and is currently working on her doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction at PSU. She has two grown children and a husband of over 20 years.

In another area, children are gathered around a small tub of pond water. They hold small magnifying glasses and are looking for signs of movement from the tadpoles. As they spot one, they glance at the bulletin board behind the table that shows the stages of develop-

Our district has five elementary schools and approximately 15 kindergarten classrooms within those schools. As I did my own analysis of the kindergarten screening results, I was able to make some interesting observations. First, as one might expect, beginning screening results had a wide range to them. Not all children in our district came to kindergarten equally prepared. In some parts of town (where families have a high socio-economic status) most children had attended one or more years of preschool. In some cases a high percentage of the children came to school able to recognize letters. In other schools, scores showed that children were starting with little to no prior knowledge of letter names. It is no surprise that initial results tended to be directly correlated to the economic level of the parents of children attending that school. My school has a mix of economic levels of families.

End of the year results show impressive growth for all children in the district. It seems predictable that those schools that started with the highest beginning scores would have the highest ending scores, and for the most part that proved true. In the fall of the 2002-03 school year, my building was ranked fourth of five for the district overall. In the spring, we had moved to third in overall ranking. Of even greater significance, even though my students' overall average wasn't the highest, when students were ranked as **meets the standard**, **exceeds**, or **continuing to develop**, my classroom had 100% of students meet or exceed the standard. When I looked closer at individual student comparisons, it wasn't my high achieving students who had made the greater impact. Yes, these students had grown, but the children who had started out in the lowest quartile overall in the district made significant growth over comparable students district wide. For the 2003-04 school year, in language arts my two classes were ranked third and sixth out

of 14 for overall average in the district in the fall. By spring, the two classes were ranked second and third.

I want to suggest that my developmentally appropriate centers are a contributing variable impacting my district test results. I feel confident saying that my teaching approach of developmentally appropriate centers is not detrimental to the learning of my students and may be very beneficial. I see this approach as having the greatest impact on the neediest students.

In light of these results, I would like to make a few observations. First, having high standards for children does not dictate how children are to be taught. The professional judgment of the teacher working with any group of children is critical. Tests are designed to give us a glimpse of what children know. Quality education is the goal, not test performance.

Second, it is our responsibility as professionals to keep the best interests of children in sight. We need to be thoughtful in what we present to children and not be intimidated by pressures from outside our classrooms, to examine new approaches critically in light of what we already know to be true about children. I believe it is faulty thinking to think that we can speed up the developmental process for children and demand they perform to our expectation, rather than planning activities based on the needs of the children before us. Maybe more accurately, I see successful teaching as a balance of understanding where we are taking children and allowing them to be where they are right at this moment. I strive in my classroom to achieve this balance.

When I began, after having taught in a Head Start program for the seven previous years, I had some serious misgivings about what I would find in the public schools. We have all heard the horror stories of teachers in public schools who don't care or don't know how to teach.

However, I haven't found this to be true at all. I work with a dedicated, caring staff that devotes many hours beyond their job requirement to the children and families assigned to them.

They are professionals who are often bombarded from all sides. The public has a tentative trust, the administration wants us to find ways to do more for less (less money, less time, less support services), the legislature is demanding better results, and the children and families come with more and more unmet needs. It seems the mentality is that education is like a production line: If we could just find the right formula for teaching, then our successful output would increase. But children aren't a manufacturing product; they are much more complicated, and what works for one child may or may not work as well for the next.

Teachers know students. They spend countless hours thinking about them, planning for them, having meetings over them. And yet, as the political pendulum continues to swing, what we know, who we are as professionals, often takes a back seat to the fear of low performing students. While I am very supportive of accountability for teachers and high standards for children, I am also a proponent of critical thinking and professionalism within our line of work.

All too often it seems that when we as teachers are being encouraged to maximize our time with children, to help them perform their best, the underlying message seems to be, "Cram in as much information as possible in a lecture-style approach. There just isn't time any more for long, drawn out projects. We have to prepare them for the test." There is a strong element of fear seeping into our profession and it is paralyzing our judgment.

It is my deepest desire in my kindergarten classroom to create an environ-

ment that both prepares children for the academic expectations of school and allows them to grow and build true understanding through hands-on experience. In the face of No Child Left Behind, teachers in classrooms across the country are feeling the pressure to push children to perform. However, I am concerned that without critical thinking and professionalism, we will cave in to the demands to teach to the test regardless of what we know to be best practices. I am confident that if we give ourselves permission to be the professionals we truly are, have the courage to speak out against expedient practices that will produce only short-term results, and continue to examine our own beliefs and practices deeply, teachers can play a vital role in bringing quality education to our students not only at the classroom level, but at the national level as well.