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# Introduction

## The Importance of Learning-Centered Kindergarten in Today's Standards-Centered World

When people find out that you teach kindergarten, what kind of response do you receive? Do you get “God bless you! You must be a special person”? Do you hear “Gee, that sounds like a fun job! You must play all day!”? Even professionals in the education profession will often assume that the job you do is less important than that of teachers from “tested” grade levels. After all, there are no real pressures in kindergarten!

If this sounds familiar, you’re not alone—all teachers of young children encounter this reaction countless times during their career. Kindergarten often holds a special place in adults’ hearts. Their golden memories of kindergarten as a time of simplicity, innocence, and wonder can be powerful and precious. These feelings are made even stronger by the regular appearance of this perfect image of kindergarten in magazine advertisements, movies, and television commercials—is there anything more endearing than a precocious five-year-old? Despite its powerful presence in our memories and in popular culture, in recent years this vision of treasured kindergarten experience has been disappearing rapidly from U.S. public schools.

## **No Child Left Behind, Standards, and Changes in Kindergarten**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires states to implement accountability systems in which all public school students in grades three through eight are taught challenging standards in reading and mathematics and tested annually to assess their mastery of those standards. Because failure to comply with this law carries significant financial penalties, NCLB prompted most states to develop content standards, adopt standardized testing programs to assess students' mastery of the standards, and require public school districts to align their curricula with the new standards-based accountability systems.

The primary grades and kindergarten were not included in NCLB's call for challenging standards. Nevertheless, the impact of NCLB has been felt strongly at these grade levels. Intense concern about preparing children to enter third grade with the foundational skills necessary to master the third-grade standards and to pass the high-stakes tests has resulted in "accountability shovedown" (Hatch, 2002, p. 457): NCLB's emphasis on student mastery of a predetermined set of learning standards has descended from the upper grades through the primary grades, and all the way down to kindergarten.

NCLB, standards-based education, and accountability shovedown have had a tremendous impact on kindergarten. Beliefs about the specific knowledge and skills that young children should be learning and understandings of the most effective ways to teach that content have been changing rapidly. As a result, today's kindergarten teachers have to contend with many new expectations, new demands, and new obligations.

## **The Need for Learning-Centered Kindergarten**

What can we do to make sure that kindergarten is an environment in which young children's experiences become treasured memories of learning about themselves and the world, making independent choices from an array of exciting activities and interesting materials, connecting with others through play and the arts, and experiencing the thrill of reaching challenging but achievable goals? The answer is simple . . . learning-centered kindergarten! Learning-centered kindergarten teaching is a way to maintain the well-loved practices unique to this wonderful grade level while still satisfying all of the obligations to teach state-mandated standards.

Despite the many changes generated by NCLB, one non-negotiable assumption at the heart of kindergarten has remained constant: Kindergarten is a place where young children learn. Reaffirming the centrality of young children's learning is the first step toward effectively responding to the many new challenges we are facing. Creating a learning-centered kindergarten is a powerful way to combine the traditional purposes of kindergarten—meeting young children's needs across all developmental domains and preparing them for future success in school—and the contemporary purposes of kindergarten—moving young children toward mastery of the academic skills mandated in the state's kindergarten standards—without sacrificing the integrity of either set of purposes.

## What Is a Learning-Centered Kindergarten?

According to a recent report from the National Education Association, learning-centered classrooms “are classrooms where teachers focus on student learning and are continuously working to understand new theories about learning and what these mean for their own teaching” (Evertson & Neal, 2006, p. 1). Teaching strategies, curriculum, instructional materials, assessment, classroom management, the organization of the physical environment, and the use of time all share a common focus on supporting student learning and achievement in the learning-centered classroom.

From this perspective learning-centered kindergarten is a classroom in which teachers make the deliberate decision to ensure that *all of their students learn every day*. Learning-centered kindergarten teachers use instructional approaches that allow the mandated content, as well as all other knowledge and skills, to be taught in ways that are meaningful, engaging, and appropriate for all children in their classes. Learning-centered kindergartens honor students' needs, value the process of discovery and meaning-making, and also maintain a focus on purposeful, productive growth toward worthy instructional outcomes.

One can find all of these qualities in learning-centered kindergartens:

- All children learn every day. “All children, no exceptions” is a key feature of learning-centered classrooms. Every child—including those with learning differences, developmental delays, physical challenges, limited English proficiency, accelerated intellectual development, home lives negatively impacted by

poverty, and so on—has multiple opportunities each day to experience meaningful, significant learning beyond the standards and to engage with the learning standards at a level and in a manner that is appropriate for them. *All children, no exceptions.*

- Instructional practices are grounded in the most up-to-date understandings of how young children learn.
- Instruction is differentiated in response to the documented needs, strengths, and learning preferences of the students in class.
- Learning means more than just mastering the standards. Five- and six-year-olds must learn and grow in all developmental domains—social, emotional, physical, and cognitive—in order to achieve success in school and in life. In a learning-centered kindergarten, social and emotional learning are an integral part of the curriculum.
- Teachers, like their students, learn every day. Teachers learn while teaching and observing students, through ongoing reflection on teaching, as a result of interactions with students' parents and caregivers, in the context of collaboration with colleagues and administrators, and in other professional development contexts.
- Parents and families are valued partners. Their expansive and multidimensional knowledge about their children contributes in significant ways to kindergarten teachers' ability to be effective with young students.
- Child-centered practices are moved into the twenty-first century. Responding to children's developmental needs and teaching the whole child are not goals of a learning-centered kindergarten. Rather, these become important tools that help kindergarten teachers meet their goal: ensuring that all students learn every day.

## **Making *Your* Kindergarten a Learning-Centered Classroom**

This book offers recommendations to help you put students' learning at the heart of your daily work. Descriptions of learning-centered instructional decision-making are given as well as learning-centered classroom practices, learning-centered perspectives on classroom management, and learning-centered professional stances. Practical

strategies for incorporating these approaches into your teaching are also provided. After reading this book you will know how to

- align your teaching practices with the latest research about how children learn;
- infuse the standards thoroughly into your instruction;
- design lessons that respond to the needs and strengths of all your students and that connect each of them to the standards in meaningful ways; and
- develop tools that clearly show parents, colleagues, and administrators that your practices are rigorous, that your students are learning, and that your curriculum is meeting all district and state expectations.

Having years of experience as a kindergarten teacher, instructional specialist, school administrator, staff developer, researcher, and mom of children with a range of exceptionalities shaped the ideas in this book and guided the efforts to provide you with the keys to success in establishing a learning-centered kindergarten classroom. The goal is to help you experience new levels of professional satisfaction and success as you manage the challenges facing teachers in today's shifting educational climate and to offer strategies that will enable you to meet your students' developmental needs, move them toward mastery of your state's standards, and help them go to first grade knowing that they are competent, capable learners. It's a challenging yet rewarding adventure. Let's get started!