

before accepting a private playdate as the best way for children to socialize.

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**Teaching Kindergarten:  
Learner-Centered Classrooms  
for the 21st Century**

*Julie Diamond, Betsy Grob, and  
Fretta Reitzes, eds.*

New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2015. Foreword, prologue, acknowledgments, introduction, children's book list, references, contributors, index. 176 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780807757116

At its heart, *Teaching Kindergarten: Learner-Centered Classrooms for the 21st Century* is a paean to the play-based, interest-driven kindergarten we know from the annals of progressive education. Its ostensible goal, though, is to resist the increasingly more familiar kindergarten, where a skills-based and overtly academic curriculum favors more time on the rug for minilessons and less time on it for building with blocks. But to label *Teaching Kindergarten* a mere apologia would be to give it short shrift. It is also an up-to-date and highly persuasive argument about why the trend toward all academics all the time is so unnecessary if later academic achievement is truly tied to what children learn in kindergarten. To this end, coeditors and longtime early-childhood educators and leaders Julie Diamond, Betsy Grob, and Fretta Reitzes offer a hefty collection of teachers' stories that demonstrate the advantages of learner-centered—progres-

sive—education for five-year-olds.

To this end, we must not be drawn to the book's subtitle over its main one. Yes, the book concerns learner-centered classrooms, but its collective strength lies in its primary appellation: *teaching* kindergarten. The critical idea is that, although progressive education may embody a belief system about how children learn best, it cannot be separated from an understanding of what teachers actually do in the classroom. The central question is: How is learner-centered teaching enacted?

Chapter 1, "Learner-Centered Teaching," by coeditor Julie Diamond, presents as fine an overview of the modern progressive educator's purview as any in teacher education today (full disclosure: I am very briefly cited). Diamond seamlessly aligns John Dewey's vision of teaching "to propel children's learning" (p. 14) with a commitment to culturally responsive teaching in a diverse world. She follows this with short introductions to key points of entry (with references to the ensuing chapters, where they are discussed in greater depth). Diamond has few good things to say about the Common Core and the accountability and standards movement, though she strongly favors rigorous, content-based curriculum, while holding teachers accountable for learning what, as she says, "*matters to them and to others*" (p. 28).

It goes without saying, of course, that topics frequently overlap in the individual chapters. Such is the nature of teaching five-year-olds. All sorts of things happen at once. Stakeholders, too, overlap. A special feature of this book is that many teacher roles are represented in it, often more than one in a chapter. We hear from head teachers, new teachers, staff developers, con-

tent specialists, and university educators, as well as the editors, whose comments appear at the end of every chapter.

On this crowded landscape, the coeditors have done an impressive job of assembling a gestalt of the teaching day and year. Chapter 2, “Kindergarten: Where It Starts and Where It Goes,” by Erin Hyde, Marilyn Martinez, and Yvonne Smith, frames the discussion. In it, Hyde talks about “intentional” teaching, where the needs of the children she has in her classroom that year—and not the children she might imagine—predominate. Math time, rest time, and even outdoor time is planned to “meet the children where they are” (p. 29). Martinez and Smith follow Hyde by responding to questions (from Julie Diamond) that address state standards, teachers’ role in facilitating learning, and working with parents. One finds the wisdom of their curricular choices in how they address children’s cognitive and social-emotional needs, as well as developmental differences, inside and in addition to the formal curriculum.

Content knowledge acquisition and academic standards have become the often touted gold standard of school reform. Six of the remaining nine chapters highlight their use of the child friendly project approach to teach content. All offer convincing evidence that five-year-olds can indeed learn a great deal when teachers are careful to include specific curricular and academic objectives inside their interest-driven explorations of a grand topic.

Chapter 3, “Children as Change-makers: Ecology in Action,” by Katherine Clunis D’Andrea, makes clear there is much teachers can do to enhance children’s relationship to the physical world outside

the school building, a long-standing mandate of the kindergarten social studies and science curricula. To start—and here’s a much-missed idea in early-childhood education—D’Andrea allows the children plenty of concentrated time to observe it. Then, as they learn more about the things that live outside (including plants and trees), she helps turn their attention to how to preserve the environment, such as educating people about the importance of trees. Juliana Harris and Katie Vidal also take us outside the classroom door in chapter 7, “Getting Our Hands Dirty: Holding On to Our Beliefs.” They describe a yearlong project on gardens in the context of their resistance to a newly mandated, supersaturated literacy curriculum. As they explain: “We had made an impression on our principal that day, but we knew it was just a beginning. We decided to display evidence of children’s learning in our hallway, focusing on social development, writing, reading, math, and science” (p. 105).

Heading back indoors, we find the disappearance of robust block and dramatic play (emphasis on robust) may be the loss most lamented by early-childhood educators in their response to the academicization of the kindergarten curriculum. Rebecca Burdett’s chapter 5, “They Thanked the Bear, Then They Ate the Bear” makes clear why. First, her detailed description of how to initiate kindergarten children into responsible and intentional block play is invaluable to anyone seeking advice on this subject. For example, during the first third of the school year, she allows half the class to have forty minutes of dedicated block play. But it is her extension of block play into a social studies

project on the local Native American community through dramatic and imaginative play that makes this chapter especially illuminating.

Chapter 6, “The Museum of Experts, El Museo de los Expertos” by Margaret Blachly and Andrea Fonesca, features the project approach as a set of individual projects within the larger theme of museums, their purpose, and their content. After exposing the children at the beginning of the year to the way museums work, children choose their own subjects to research and work on during daily Worktime Choices in a variety of appropriate activities, including dramatic play, block play, and literacy. Depending on the topic, math and science apply, too. The culminating activity, naturally, is the construction of a classroom museum, open to all.

Dana Roth and Renee Dinnerstein in chapter 4, “Saim’s Wheelchair: Making a Transportation Study Meaningful,” offer an especially vivid portrait of how classroom teachers can forge a clear path between school district expectations and an engaging, if not socially just, curriculum.

The project approach is not featured in Hollee Freeman’s chapter 9, “Kindergarten Math: A Math Specialist’s Perspective.” After introductory remarks that establish general norms for math pedagogy, Freeman analyzes several different examples of kindergartner’s thinking in math to make the important point that “observing and looking at [children’s] work is not enough” (p. 124). Teachers need to have discussions with children and peers to explore how children actually think mathematically if they are to scaffold learning successfully. Teachers also need to be sure of their own mathematical content knowledge.

With regard to children’s interpersonal tensions and altercations, Aaron Neimark’s chapter 8, “The Chairs Are Theirs: Conflict Resolution in a Kindergarten Classroom,” describes his use of “problem-solving chairs” to give children a reliable format and structure in which to talk out their conflicts with each other. Neimark explains that he first scaffolds the technique through “fake problem solving” before turning the children loose. As he explains, the effort takes only a few seconds per problem. Given the kindergartners’ great interest in fair play, Neimark’s approach is a worthy idea.

Finally, Kelly D’Addona, Laura Morris, and Cynthia Paris’s “Courage in Kindergarten: Facing Our Wolves,” bring the chapters of teachers’ stories to a close. It artfully positions a new teacher, a cooperating teacher, and a teacher educator in looking back on how they responded to challenges (“wolves”) outside the classroom door, who in one way or other undermines progressive teaching. The authors do not merely complain, however, they succinctly encourage smart responses that enable teachers to go forward, while having the courage to learn at the same time.

The overall take away from this valuable book is the coeditors’ claim in their concluding remarks that becoming a good teacher is synonymous with developing a “teaching self.” Wisely, they note this takes time and is not done alone. Their book, and the many voices and perspectives it comprises, is testimony to the role good and effective company can play on this journey. The very good news is that, to cite Ruth Charney in the book’s preface, the portraits of teachers’ lives in this book go

far in helping us “fall in love with teaching again” (p. ix).

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**Essential Play Therapy  
Techniques: Time-Tested  
Approaches**

*Charles E. Schaefer and Donna Cangelosi*  
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Play therapists understand that children communicate best through play and, in effect, use toys as their words to express their confusion and pain as well as their joy. Play therapists not only use this form of communication with children to help them heal, but they also teach other important people in a child’s life to communicate with the child in this special way. In this spirit, Schaefer and Cangelosi provide readers with a user friendly guide of fifty-eight different techniques with countless variations that can be applied while playing with children. The book is very well organized with interventions coming from seven broad categories that include techniques involving specific toys, metaphors, role playing, creative arts, fantasy, and games.

Although some of the techniques in this impressive collection could be employed by nontherapeutic adults in a child’s life, most would work better with the help of a play therapist. For instance, it is easy to instruct a child in the Draw a

Family technique simply by following suggestions in the book. However, the authors also explain that one can find meaning in the distance between family members, their relative size, and the order in which they are drawn. Adults not trained in play therapy might misinterpret this meaning and respond defensively, which can harm the relationship and communication between adult and child.

At the same time, Schaefer and Cangelosi suggest techniques to enlist the aid of others, such as parents. Externalization Play describes the advantages of “putting something outside its original borders, especially to put a human function outside the human body” (p. 72). When a child perceives the problem as an inherent part of the self, it is much more difficult to make changes. Yet by using the narrative technique of externalization, a child can perceive the problem as separate from his or herself and even join forces with parents and other supportive adults to overcome behavioral problems. In one variation, the authors discuss forming a piece of clay into a monster figure to represent the scary element of a child’s nightmare, which makes a child’s fears concrete and more manageable. Play therapists can use their own creativity to design additional variations such as having a child create his or her own anger out of clay. A child could then engage in play with the clay figure, taking care of it, and perhaps allowing the representation of anger to help tell the child, parents, and therapist what it needs to feel calmer.

A variety of play therapists will appreciate that the authors interweave many popular theoretical orientations through the techniques, including cogni-