

The Common Core can't speed up child development

By Joseph Ganem

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Recent evaluations of the state's preschoolers have determined that only 47 percent are ready for kindergarten, compared to 83 percent judged ready last year. This drastic drop isn't the result of an abrupt, catastrophic decline in the cognitive abilities of our children. Instead it results from a re-definition of kindergarten readiness, which now means being able to succeed academically at a level far beyond anything expected in the past. For example, a child entering kindergarten is now expected to know the difference between informative/explanatory writing and opinion writing. The concern is that preschoolers without that knowledge will not succeed at meeting the new higher-level Common-Core standards. However, I think a more pressing concern is: Why do we have educational standards that are not aligned with even the most basic facts of human development? Clearly these test results show that the problem is with the standards, not the children.

Educational attainment is part of human development, and fundamentally this is a biological process that cannot be sped up. We cannot wish away our biological limitations because we find them inconvenient. Children will learn crawling, walking, listening, talking and toilet training, all in succession at developmentally appropriate ages. Once in school, for skills that require performing a physical task, that are in what Bloom's Taxonomy classifies as the "psychomotor domain," it is understood that children will only learn when they are physically and developmentally ready. No one expects four-year olds to type fluently on a computer keyboard, play difficult Chopin Etudes on the piano, prepare elaborate meals in the kitchen or drive a car.

However, for skills in what Bloom calls the "cognitive domain," the school curriculum has become blind not only to the progression of normal child development but also to natural variations in the rate that children develop. It is now expected that pre-school children should be able to grasp sophisticated concepts in mathematics and written language. In addition, it is expected that all children should be at the same cognitive level when they enter kindergarten, and proceed through the entire grade-school curriculum in lock step with one another. People, who think that all children can learn in unison, have obviously never worked with special needs children or the gifted and talented.

Demanding that children be taught to developmentally inappropriate standards for language and math comprehension is not a harmless experiment. This exercise in futility wastes the time of teachers and students and unethically sets all of them up to fail. It exacerbates the very problems that the new curriculum is supposed to fix. It leaves boys, whose verbal development for biological reasons already lags behind girls, even further behind and will accelerate the trend of fewer boys going on to college. Even today boys only make up about 40 percent of college students nationwide and their numbers will continue to dwindle.

The new curriculum standards and testing regimens are motivated by a well-intentioned desire to close achievement gaps that exist between the various socio-economic and ethnic and racial groups. There is a belief that by demanding that all children meet a set of rigid and arbitrarily high academic standards, achievement gaps can be closed and economic opportunities increased for all. The apparent reasoning is that if all children receive the same education and are held to the same academic standards, then all children will have equal opportunity to succeed as adults.

However, addressing pervasive economic inequality by pretending that in an ideal world all children should be alike isn't a solution. The inequalities that plague our society are inherent in the structure of our political and economic systems. A new curriculum will not change the underlying pathologies corrupting these structures. It is a mistake to conflate unjust economic inequalities that arise from our broken political and economic systems with normal differences in abilities and dispositions among people that arise from being human. If all barriers to inequality were broken down, people would still be different from one another and normal human development would still unfold.

Education should be about helping each child, regardless of background or academic readiness, achieve his or her full, unique potential as a human being. It should instill not just academics but also physical, emotional and social skills, which are also essential for making meaningful contributions to the well being of our families, communities and the economy. Differences between people that arise across all skill sets and educational domains are an inherent and valued part of the human experience that should be celebrated in school, not erased.

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