**Study Finds That Kindergarten is Too Easy**

By Holly Yettick on February 13, 2014 12:35 PM

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Kindergarten might be[**the new 1st grade**](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2014/01/is_kindergarten_the_new_first.html) but it is still too easy. A [**forthcoming study**](http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/AERA-PublishedResearchofNote/AcademicContent,StudentLearning,andthePersistenceofPreschoolEffects/tabid/15370/Default.aspx) in the peer-refereed *American Educational Research Journal* finds that students make bigger gains in reading and math when they learn more advanced content such as adding numbers and matching letters to sounds. Yet kindergarten teachers spend nearly twice as much time on basics such as alphabet recognition and counting out loud. Study authors [**Amy Claessens**](http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/directory/faculty/amy_claessens),[**Mimi Engel**](http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/bio/mimi-engel) and[**Chris Curran**](https://my.vanderbilt.edu/chriscurran/) found that the majority of kindergartners already know how to do these things when they start school.

 "If you teach kids what they already know, they're not going to learn as much," said Claessens, an assistant professor in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago and the mother to a kindergartner. "I would go even further and say more time on basic  [content] is actually harmful to kids particularly in mathematics. In reading, it is neutral, but math is negative."

In a [**paper**](http://epa.sagepub.com/content/35/2/157.abstract) published last year in the peer-refereed *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Engel, Claessens and Maida A. Finch found that even students who started kindergarten lacking basic skills made bigger gains when teachers emphasized advanced material. The *American Educational Research Journal* findings add a wrinkle by suggesting that kindergarten students learn more when taught advanced content, regardless of whether they have attended preschool or come from low-income families.

*Academic Content, Student Learning, and the Persistence of Preschool Effects* is based upon a large, nationally representative sample ([**ECLS-K**](http://nces.ed.gov/ecls/kindergarten.asp)) representing more than 15,000 students who started kindergarten in 1998-99. The article, which you can read [**in full**](http://aer.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/11/25/0002831213513634.full.pdf+html?ijkey=xQcS3qA7Bd4UE&keytype=ref&siteid=spaer)for free for the next month, is the most frequently viewed piece on the *American Educational Research Journal'*s [**website**](http://aer.sagepub.com/), even though it was just posted November 13th and has not yet appeared in print. (This is relatively rare since it often takes academic articles years to wend their way toward most-viewed status.) Claessens speculates that one reason that the findings have received so much attention is that they have some pretty interesting policy implications.

"Shifting what you're teaching is very cost effective," Claessens said.

Claessens notes that [**past research**](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2014/01/is_kindergarten_the_new_first.html) has found that schools have already ramped up the amount of time spent on spent on academic content in kindergarten. So if these research results hold, teachers could see a real difference by making a relatively small and inexpensive change that would not further subtract from the time kindergartners want and need for other important areas such as social emotional learning and physical education.

Like other researchers,  Claessens, Engel and Curran found that kindergarten teachers spend a lot more time on literacy than on math.  On average, teachers taught basic reading skills 18 days a month or nearly every school day and advanced literacy 11 days per month. By contrast, they spent ten days a month on basic math and six days on math that was more advanced. These results were the same for teachers serving bigger and smaller percentages of children from lower-income families.

 "Early-childhood and kindergarten teachers are not as confident about teaching early math and the way they should teach early math," Claessens said. "We have for a long time pushed and done a good job of focusing on reading and basic skills for reading. I don't think we know as much or are as confident about early-childhood math."

Claessens said she had shared her findings with her daughter's kindergarten teacher, who was already emphasizing more advanced skills. She has also presented her research to school district leadership teams.

How did they react?

"Not surprised but they're not quite sure how to change it."