

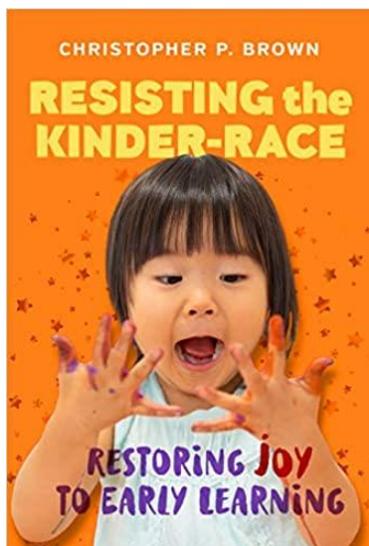
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Review of Resisting the KINDER-RACE: Restoring joy to early learning

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Overview

. . . I contend that kindergarten must be framed as the expansion of learning. Enacting such a vision not only requires a rethinking of teaching, learning, assessment, accountability, and many other constructs (e.g., school readiness) but also requires active, practical and political participation by stakeholders at all levels of governance and implementation (Brown, 2021, pp. 156-157).

I begin this review of *Resisting the KINDER-RACE* by quoting the author, Christopher P. Brown, to provide a sense of the reframing his takes towards the subject matter: restoring joy to early learning. Without a doubt, kindergarten has become a race for students to learn a specific set of skills deemed necessary to pass future standardized tests.

Throughout this book, Brown provides teacher educators and stakeholders with a history of how kindergarten classrooms have changed nationwide from nurturing children to entering a fast-paced race of learning skills, the consequences of that change, and his perspective on what we should do about it. Then, drawing on his own research, the author offers political and practical strategies that perhaps can move us towards changing the everyday kindergarten instructional practices and policies that are currently overpowering our public school system. This review summarizes each chapter of Brown's book and then closes with my thoughts and possible instructional practices for kindergarten classrooms that support Brown's ideas.

Chapter 1: Why Examine the Changed Kindergarten?

Brown (2021) begins this chapter with his concern and interest in how standards-based accountability reforms have impacted kindergarten classrooms nationwide. Brown defends that although twenty years have passed since the inception of the No

Child Left behind Act, society has yet to witness a system where all children are successful academically, particularly marginalized populations. Additionally, the author expresses the need and demand to reevaluate the forced changes in kindergarten that standard-based accountability reforms have created. Next, Brown gives an overview of four theoretical lenses he employs to "uncover and highlight how local, state, and national education stakeholders make sense of the Kinder-Race specifically and of policymakers' SBA (standard-based accountability) reforms in general" (p. 6). The four theoretical, conceptual frameworks employed are: sensemaking (Coburn, 2001), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), and neoliberalism. Brown explains each of these four theoretical lenses and how he will go about using these theories to reroute the Kinder-Race to help reveal and describe the "complexity of what is occurring in kindergarten" (p. 8). The author explains that he is not advocating to return to the good ole days of kindergarten, nor is he promoting a magic formula to solve all the problems. Instead, it is an effort to offer ideas that can chip away at the issue at hand. In the next chapter, Brown gives readers a historical landscape of kindergarten and the transitions that have occurred over the decades.

Chapter 2: How Kindergarten Transitioned from a Garden to a Race

This chapter provides an informative history of kindergarten's origin and original intentions dating back to the early 1800s and how it has evolved into what it is today. First, Brown takes us through a brief history of the expansion of kindergarten in the U.S., how it shifted after WWII, and how the shifts resulted in three waves of reform: (1) implications of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), (2) the call for higher national standards and goals initiated by the National Governors Association, and (3) the Clinton

Administration's reform which created a plan that every child in the U.S. would attend kindergarten ready to learn. Next, the author hones-in on how over time, these three waves of reform have impacted the decisions policymakers have made over the decades and how this has contributed to the shifts seen in public schools that focus on accountability and academic performance, standardization, and what Hatch (2002) coined, "the accountability shove down" (p. 462). Finally, the author ends this chapter by explaining how the policymakers' reform choices have controlled how kindergarten teachers are expected to teach and what that should look like (i.e., scripted curricula). Furthermore, he describes that kindergarten needs to move "beyond economic principles of standards, academic achievement, and accountability..." (p. 27) and consider students' "sociocultural realities" (p. 27), in addition to supporting kindergarteners in a democratic learning environment.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4: Experiencing the Kinder-Race and Figuring the Kinder-Race Within the Worlds of Schooling

In Chapter three, the author underscores the changes in kindergarten with examples researchers have documented from day-to-day observations of an actual kindergarten classroom in Texas. Brown provides in detail the types of activities, and regimen one teacher, Ms. Cutler, and students follow on a day-to-day basis in the areas of literacy and mathematics. To make sense of how Ms. Cutler enacted the Kinder-Race, Brown applies culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) as a conceptual framework. In a very detailed description of the hourly activities within this classroom, it becomes evident that skill instruction is prioritized, and there is no wiggle room for anything but teacher-instructed curricula. The author points out that although Ms. Cutler has recognized that her teacher-directed instruction focuses on "teaching

what they are to teach rather than whom they are teaching" (p. 28) and supports the policies in place, she expresses her responsibility to prepare students for the next level. The author briefly mentions that the typical day-to-day routine in this kindergarten classroom disconnects from the body of research that supports how children learn and develop as sociocultural human beings.

In Chapter four, Brown digs in deeper and investigates how students from Ms. Cutler's classroom view kindergarten and how teachers, family members, and school administration from Texas and West Virginia make sense of the Kinder-Race. The author uses Holland et al.'s (1998) notion of figure worlds to understand how stakeholders in these contrasting states make sense of kindergarten and, "...what opportunities for change they believed existed or would want to see so that what was occurring in the Kinder-Race aligned with their conceptions of kindergarten" (Brown, 2021, p. 58). First, Brown provides readers with kindergarteners' perceptions of their figured worlds. Then, in interviews conducted with students from Ms. Cutler's classroom, we learn that while they like their teacher and collectively wish it were more fun, they believe the purpose of kindergarten is to prepare for future success. In my opinion, this is not surprising as this is a result of students' day-to-day personal experiences in school and the classroom environment that they are a part of. It is essential to point out that the example is just one classroom that perpetuates the Kinder-Race and should not serve as the standard for what is happening in all classrooms around the nation— they could be for the better or worse.

Next, Brown provides readers with an insight into the perceptions that stakeholders, teachers, and family members, have on kindergarten, and throughout the chapter, a few themes emerge. For example, the pressure that teachers and students

feel in kindergarten to be prepared for first grade is recognized, and the push for increased academics seemed to be a vital concern. Similarly, parents seemed worried that the lack of play due to academic achievement standards would ruin students' feelings towards school. However, overall, interviews revealed that teachers, stakeholders, and parents "struggled to align their imagined worlds of kindergarten with the kinder-race" (Brown, 2021, p. 90). While they supported the idea of improving today's kindergarten, the pressure to teach to the test, the goal to prepare students for first grade, and the accountability policies in place serve as a barrier, blocking any movement that would reframe kindergarten in ways that are necessary for change.

As a result, Brown strongly advocates for authentic teacher-child interactions, student choice in activities, and the incorporation of students' sociocultural worlds within the curriculum. Conversely, the example of Ms. Cutler's classroom gives us insight into what is and how a classroom defined by standardization and accountability has little room for anything other than test preparation and first-grade readiness.

Chapter 5: The Tension Between Fostering Democratic Students Versus Individualized Performers

Through the lens of neoliberalism, sensemaking (Coburn, 2001), culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), and figured worlds (Holland et al., 2014), in this chapter, Brown examines how stakeholders from both West Virginia and Texas wrap their heads around the surrounding policies placed on kindergarten. While interviewing stakeholders at the district/county, state, and national level about neoliberal-standard based accountability reforms, they confirm these reforms have contributed to the birth of the kinder-race. Though in interviews, the stakeholders offer

strategies about how to reroute kindergarten, which is reflected in the voices of these stakeholders that the tensions are high and that it is a daunting task. The author reiterates that while these stakeholders recognize the need to shift the focus and reframe kindergarten, "the accountability policies enacted to ensure such success appeared to overpower any potential for change" (Brown, 2021, p. 130).

Chapter 6: Kindergarten Is the Expansion of Learning Reflection and Critique

In the final chapter of this book, the author suggests ways to move forward beyond the standard narrative that kindergarten is a way to get ready for school and time to prepare for standardization testing. First, he offers two methods of reframing teaching and learning: (1) requires guided play throughout the day, and (2) RIGOROUS DAP, which is "not a theory of instruction rather (Brown et al., 2015), a construct and an acronym that offers 11 principles of instruction in which early educators can engage with their students daily" (Brown, 2021, p.138). For example, RIGOROUS DAP includes teaching and learning principles that allow for students' sociocultural worlds to be appreciated, learning experiences that offer choice, challenges and new content, differentiated instruction, on-going assessments, and a classroom that grow as a community. Second, Brown recommends that assessment should inform teachers' instruction to provide children with learning experiences tailored to students' needs in the community and the child's sociocultural worlds. Third, the author strongly advocates for the change in reframing accountability. Finally, he highlights that in order to reframe kindergarten as an expansion of learning, we must shift our focus to "promotion, documentation, and expansion of individualized and community-based learning" (p. 144).

Brown then shifts to how stakeholders can support students, teachers, families, principals, and administration in expanding the learning of kindergarteners. For example, one way to move away from the "school readiness construct" (Brown, 2021, p.145) requires instruction that supports and motivates children to learn and allow for three basic human needs to be met: a sense of autonomy, a sense of relatedness and a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). To conclude, Brown ends the chapter with strategies of how all parties at the local, state, and federal levels need to work together to expand learning for all children.

Reflection and Moving Forward

Resisting the Kinder-Race: Restoring Joy to Early Learning is a highly readable, organized, and insightful book that stresses the complexity of today's kindergarten while also offering realistic ideas for change. The in-depth glance into the typical day-to-day activities of the Kinder-Race allows teacher educators to see one teacher's reality and its impact on their students and classroom environment. Brown's focus on the four theoretical frameworks is appropriate for educators and administrators who have little background in these frameworks. Additionally, Brown's framework in this book contains ideas I can get behind as a previous primary grades' teacher and an elementary teacher educator. Thus, I would like to support further Brown's belief that "the learning environment must become a place that empowers, supports, and nurtures children's expansion of learning individually and collectively" (p. 145).

In the final chapter, Brown offers the idea of using 11 principles of instruction that primary grades teachers can use with their students, which he calls RIGOROUS DAP. While this framework can be impactful, Brown does not give examples of what

that might entail. Thus, I propose two teacher practices that would support Brown's ideas.

The context that would most likely allow RIGOROUS DAP to happen would require an autonomy-supportive environment focusing on intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), enabling children time to act strategically to accomplish their goals and pursue their interests during literate activities. We know from research that young children are most motivated to participate in literacy activities that are open rather than closed (Turner, 1995). Open literacy tasks do not require a right or wrong way of doing something. Instead, they allow children to choose among literacy activities, control over their learning, and opportunities to collaborate with others and construct meaning in ways students know how through reading and writing (Turner, 1995). The first open literacy activity teachers can integrate into their daily routine is a modernized shared reading model (Holdaway, 1982) with contemporary pattern books, and opportunities for students to read and explore those pattern books on their own. This experience will increase students' knowledge of concepts about print (Clay, 1991) in a meaningful way, engage students in real multimodal pattern books of their choice (not created for a curriculum), and foster a love of reading from the beginning. Second, I propose that students engage in a meaning-making enterprise, Ray and colleagues (2008) call making books. Making Books is an open literacy activity that would allow students to compose like real authors and illustrators and write for meaningful reasons while also increasing their knowledge of print concepts, the alphabetic code, and understanding what it means to be a writer. Although it will take a village to make changes, instructional transformations like those I have provided would be a good starting point.

All in all, this book pulls back the curtain on the reality of what has happened to our kindergarten programs and offers ways we can move forward to implement changes. I highly recommend this book

for early childhood teacher educators who are interested in improving early childhood education.

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