

The Recurring Kindergarten Panic

Fractured Narratives in Media Framing 1965-2017

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the media's powerful role in shaping public understanding and policy development we analyzed 201 articles from four major national newspapers, to understand how narratives about kindergarten's significance have evolved over time. Across time the press advanced a story of kindergarten in crisis, however, kindergarten's purpose was framed differently for dominant and non-dominant race and class groups. We underscore the media's role in reflecting racialized and classed messages about kindergarten and the need for nuance and a diversity of voices in both academia and the mainstream press.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Frame analysis:

- Shows "how frames, as part of culture, get embedded in media content, how they work, and how they interact with the schemata of both the journalist and the audience member." (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 2).
- Highlights how information is organized in relation to socio-cultural discourses and how understandings are structured and tied to particular interests (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001, p. 190).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How has the print media framed kindergarten from 1964 to the present?
- How has the print media framed kindergarten's purposes, problems, and remedies differently depending on the race and SES of students and families?

METHODOLOGY

202 articles from the New York Times; Washington Post; Wall Street Journal; Los Angeles Times

Example codes:

- Concerns (falling behind; getting a head start); parents/families (assets/agency; deficits/dependence)
- Child Characteristics (age; developmental patterns; affluence; poverty; readiness)

Chronological annotated bibliography and historical mapping

There was a time when a high school diploma meant that an American student had taken a giant step on the educational ladder. Now the make-or-break rung in many schools is being dropped to the ground, to the little feet of children, some of whom are facing the possibility of flunking kindergarten. (Aplin-Brownlee, V. (October 7, 1984). *New programs. hold kindergartners back.* The Washington Post.)

You may not have noticed—few grown-ups have—but the equivalent of the Hundred Years' War is being waged in your local kindergarten classrooms, with legions of researchers, educators, policy makers and parents struggling silently over how and what kindergarteners should be taught. (Slade, M. (April 10, 1994). *Building a better kindergarten.* The New York Times. Section 4A, p. 12.)

This is kindergarten. We force children to take tests that their brains cannot grasp. We ignore research that proves that children who are 5-6 learn best experientially. We rob them of precious free play that teaches them how to be good citizens, good friends and good thinkers. (Strauss, V. (September 2, 2015). *Test prep for 5-year-olds is a real thing. Here's what it looks like.* The Washington Post.)

In the period of 1964 to 2017, the media framed kindergarten as:

- experiencing a state of crisis or impending death
- socio-culturally, politically, and economically significant

Framing tools helped to sustain these narratives.

For example, media used:

- Opposing sides' narrative structures
- Pitted advocates of academic kindergarten against "developmentalists," emphasizing disagreements and minimizing variation within camps
- Vivid imagery to depict scope of changes
- "When I was a child ... kindergarten was a place to play. ... No more. Instead of digging in sandboxes, today's kindergarteners prepare for a life of multiple-choice boxes by plowing through standardized tests" (Orenstein, 2009).
- "Once the province of milk, cookies and finger painting, kindergarten has become much more scholastically focused—what some educators consider a kind of boot camp for the first grade" (Lombardi, 1990).



CONCLUSIONS

Underneath this narrative of crisis, the media advanced separate storylines for different groups of children, depending on race and socioeconomic status. Storylines differed in three dimensions:

- Whose perspectives and experiences were centered or marginalized;
- How the purpose of kindergarten was presented
- Which problems with kindergarten were identified

REFERENCES

S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy, & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 7–31). Mahwah, NJ.

Van Gorp, B. (2007). The constructionist approach to framing: Bringing culture back in. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 60–78.

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