

# Early Education Commission

*A community leadership collaborative supporting the United Way's goal of ensuring children are ready for school*



**January 13, 2009 Meeting**

## **Outline of remarks by:**



**Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D.**  
**Professor Emerita &**  
**Co-Director, Clearinghouse on Early Childhood & Parenting**  
**University of Illinois**

## **Lessons from Far and Near: Implications of International Developments in Early Childhood Education**

*Lessons from Far and Near* addresses some of the major issues in the field of early education based on perspectives gained from international experiences (visits to preschools and lectures in 54 countries) and 30+ years of work with colleagues in the U.S. and abroad.

### **I. International perspectives**

#### **A. Similarities across countries**

1. People who do the same type of work across countries understand each other better than those who have different roles
2. Our roles are more powerful determinants of our ideas, ideals and ideologies than the larger political, social and cultural context in which we work
3. Common to most countries is the low status, low pay and poor or insufficient training of early education teachers/staff
4. Children of affluent families around the world have preschools that are more alike across countries than they are for children within their own country

#### **B. Good practices in other countries**

1. Scandinavia – long history of being exemplary
  - a. Sweden has parental leave for both parents (18 months total) and relatively few young children are in daycare for this period of their lives
  - b. Home care of infants means that the state does not have to build, staff or maintain facilities for their care

- c. Long history of mixed-age grouping of young children in preschools and up through primary school; a more home-like atmosphere rather than an instructional one
  - d. Outdoor activity emphasized (also in New Zealand)
2. City of Reggio Emilia, Italy – a high quality program not common in other areas of Italy
- a. Two fully qualified teachers for each preschool class
  - b. Each preprimary setting is usually composed of three classes from age 3-6
  - c. Exceptional program of in-service education and support; teaching staff also meets weekly to discuss their work, solicit suggestions, focus on the children’s experiences
  - d. Monthly gathering of all the city’s preprimary staff for same purposes
  - e. Specialist staff member, the “atelierista” works with small groups of children in an atelier (similar to an art studio)



*Atelier,  
Diana School,  
City of Reggio Emilia, Italy*

The environment in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, is considered the “third educator” in conjunction with the two classroom teachers (Gandini, 1998, p. 177). The atelier, or art/creative studio, as well as other spaces, include aspects of home: vases of flowers, real dishes, tablecloths, plants – beautiful objects in their own right, arranged in a meaningful context.

The walls hold a history of the life within the school in the form of documentation panels of children’s words and photos – from past projects and current ones.

- f. A “pedagogista” provides support to all staff at each preprimary site
  - g. Cultural Mediators (immigrants from other countries to the city who speak Italian) help staff understand their communities’ needs and vice versa
3. United States – has provided lessons to other countries
- a. How best to respond to growing diversity in the population
  - b. Awareness of gender and equality issues
  - c. Concept of “alignment” – a lesson that may not be so beneficial
    - 1) A “push down” phenomenon now being instituted in U.K. (four year olds to have beginning reading instruction)
    - 2) Shift in early education that recommends alignment of curriculum to smooth children’s transition from preschool to school
    - 3) Main idea in recent edition of NAEYC “Developmentally Appropriate Practices”
    - 4) Katz perspective: alignment means “doing earlier and earlier to children what probably shouldn’t be done to them later either!”

## II. A new paradigm

### A. Building a good foundation on which the rest of a child's education can be safely built is like designing and building a structure

1. *Principle*: base the design on comprehensive information; teacher should gather as much info as possible about the kinds of experiences each child has had or not had (know each child)
2. *Principle*: design based on a focus on characteristics; plan experiences for young children in terms of broad aims and goals, as well as long-term effects of early learning experiences
3. *Principle*: anticipate forces which will be acting in the future; ascertain what kinds of distractions young children will likely encounter in their next school experiences
4. *Principle*: failure to attend to #1-3 can lead to serious damage; in education this includes alarming dropout rates, lack of engagement and boredom with school

### B. Issues to address in designing a good curriculum foundation

1. Be aware of children's cultural backgrounds
2. Address social and emotional development early
3. Emphasize physical, aesthetic, cultural and fundamental aspects of growth (not simply learning discrete skills)
4. Discern between short-term and long-term effects of the experiences provided

### C. Four basic questions

1. What should be learned; what should NOT be learned?
2. *When* should it be learned? There is not agreement on this point.
3. How is it best learned? (depends on #1 and #2)
4. How can we tell if learning has occurred? (methods of evaluation and assessment; but they should not result in "teaching to the tests")

### D. Concern with excessive emphasis on "outcomes"

1. Excessive emphasis on "outcomes" in preschool and primary education today
2. More appropriate to address standards in terms of ultimate effects of early experiences on children
3. Recommend "standards of experiences" that all young children should have much of the time:
  - a) feeling of belonging to a group of peers
  - b) being intellectually engaged, absorbed, challenged
  - c) being engaged in extended interactions (conversations, discussions, planning)
  - d) being involved in sustained investigations of aspects of their own environment
  - e) taking initiative in a range of activities; accepting responsibility
  - f) experiencing satisfaction from overcoming obstacles and solving problems
  - g) having confidence in their own intellectual powers
  - h) helping others find out things and understand them better
  - i) applying their developing literacy and numeracy skills in purposeful ways

4. “Standards of experiences” are likely to have good short *and* long-term effects

**E. Basic principles – what should be learned/what should NOT be learned?**

1. Take a developmental approach, taking into account both dimensions: *normative* (what most children of that age can do) and *dynamic*
2. Recognize that there are disagreements about early reading instruction
3. Think about four types of learning:
  - a) acquiring knowledge as well as understanding; being engaged in tasks that children understand; concern for both immediate and long-term effects
  - b) skills (social, intellectual, preliminary academic, fine and gross motor) that must be practiced
  - c) dispositions (habits of mind with intentions, motives and feelings) which can actually be damaged by instruction that is offered too early and too intensely about topics distant from the young child’s firsthand experience
  - d) feelings, most importantly of confidence and competence (vs. “self-esteem”)

**F. Distinctions between cognitive goals: academic vs. intellectual**

1. Academic – acquiring bits of information, usually related to pre-literacy and numeracy skills – *when* do they matter to children?
2. Intellectual – the life of the mind, including dispositions such as reasoning, hypothesizing, predicting, analyzing
3. Young children need frequent opportunities to be engaged in investigations to build their intellectual dispositions
4. Appropriate curriculum for young children would have them seeking mastery of academic skills *in service of* their intellectual pursuits (rather than as separate from their investigations)
5. Project work with young children suggests that we underestimate their intellectual abilities; see examples of early educators’ project work at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu>

III. Conclusion – lay foundations that can support long-term goals (such as being a life- long learner), rather than only supporting short-term goals (such as gains on annual tests)

- A. If foundations are not properly laid at outset, it can be difficult and expensive to repair later on**
- B. Issue yet to be fully examined: relationships between early experiences and long-term stress management**
- C. A good educational foundation can only be built if there are capable, well-trained and well-qualified teachers who have decent working conditions and good compensation**
- D. Long-term intellectual, academic and financial benefits of early education are dependent on the best possible quality - throughout the USA**