

Early Education Commission

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



Research Abstract

Title: “International Perspectives: Hunches from My Travels,” based on a presentation at the National Association of Young Children conference, President’s Seminar, November 1998

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Abstract

Lilian Katz has traveled to and worked with colleagues in early childhood education in 53 countries around the globe since 1974. She has shared these “hunches” from her travels in both print and presentations, most recently in 2004.

1. Similarities across countries - One of Dr. Katz’s most enduring observations is the similarities she finds between early education issues in all countries, which she theorizes is because of the context of people doing similar work across borders. She also has observed another (unfortunate) similarity and that is the “low status, low pay and poor or insufficient training” common to the early education field in most of the countries she has visited.

Dr. Katz also observes that she is concerned about the “Americanization” of the world, especially in regard to excessive emphasis on testing and the encouragement of excessive self-centeredness and self-indulgence.

2. What does it feel like to be a teacher of young children? – Dr. Katz has observed that teachers of young children in many other countries seem to have more well-behaved, attentive and focused classrooms than those in the U.S. She notes that teachers of young children in North America have to compete for children’s attention in environments full of highly stimulating and exciting events, such as video games, television, colorful books, toys and movies.

However, she hypothesizes from her observations that many of the teachers whose classrooms are well-behaved are being run by adults who expect compliance with their requests, take it for granted that they will be obeyed and address children in a confident way that assumes they will respond positively. According to her, the reverse can also be predicted: the more tentatively the adult addresses the child, the less likely the child will respond in the desired way. Dr. Katz also observed that teachers in classrooms with well-behaved children appear to be “deeply

convinced” that what they were doing and asking of the children was right and in their best interests.

Additionally, she notes that children in some other countries never hear their teachers criticized, and she is often amazed about what she hears adults say about teachers and schools in the presence of children in the U.S. – which she believes can empower children to be defiant.

3. The spread of ideas across borders – Dr. Katz observes that there is a great deal of adoption of practices across borders around the world and it has varied through the decades, depending on the emerging theories and the countries from which they came. She notes that while American theories being considered overseas are sometimes met with cultural resistance, she has noted no U.S. criticism of ideas from Europe (such as Reggio Emilia) on grounds that they may not be culturally relevant to the United States.

4. Are some issues unique to the U.S.? – Having been asked to speak to associations and organizations around the world, Dr. Katz has noticed that several issues commonly discussed in the U.S. are never on the agenda in other countries’ meetings. These include: classroom management and the development of self-esteem. With regard to self-esteem, she theorizes that the U.S., being a relatively open society, fosters the belief that every person should have the tools to succeed at any level or any job (“success for all”), even if that is a practical impossibility. She suggests that the goal of education should be that everyone learns what it takes to lead a satisfying life.

5. Self-criticism in the U.S. – Even though Americans can be self-deprecating and consider other societies better than the U.S. society, Dr. Katz recognizes that all cultures have problems and issues. She notes that Americans are “experts in open criticism of their own schools” which she believes is demoralizing to teachers and schools, and which in turn brings on further criticism. She suggests that other countries are just more successful at hiding their failures than Americans.

In conclusion, Dr. Katz states that the U.S. often ranks below other countries in science and math achievement scores, yet the quality of life and economic success of the United States is admired around the world. Additionally, she is dismayed that the long and historic commitment to the “common school” in the U.S. is under threat from vouchers and charters – and hopes that educators can restore faith in common schools.