Alliance for Childhood

A Call to Action on the Education of Young Children

Background Information and References
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Historical Context

Psychologist Ed Zigler of Yale University, one of the designers of Head Start, points out that for 50 years early childhood education has swung like a pendulum between the cognitive approach and the whole child approach (Zigler, Singer, and Bishop-Josef: *Children's Play: The Roots of Reading*, Zero to Three Press, 2004).

The latest pendulum swing has been propelled by the current administration and the No Child Left Behind Act. It has pushed early childhood education strongly toward the cognitive approach, with overwhelming emphasis on early academic achievement, including the testing of young children to measure their accomplishments. What has been lost or severely curtailed in this change are activities that foster social and emotional learning, so necessary in early childhood, as well as socio-dramatic play and hands-on, experiential activities, including art and music.

Increasingly, kindergarten has become a full day of school, and nearly the whole day is devoted to academic instruction. One recess time of 25 minutes may remain, but many teachers report there is no time for indoor socio-dramatic play, despite the abundance of research showing the gains linked to such play for children's overall development. Most disturbing are the reports from teachers that if they give five-year-olds time to play, the children literally do not know what to do. "They have no ideas of their own," reported experienced kindergarten teachers in an Alliance for Childhood pilot study in Atlanta.

"The disappearance of play is a tragedy not yet fully explored or understood," says Joan Almon, president of the Alliance. "Research and experience suggest that today's children will not develop as well cognitively, socially, or emotionally as those whose childhoods were rich with play.

"This could have a profound effect on society," Almon continues. "How will our children and grandchildren sustain democracy, for instance, and address the complex issues of their time if they cannot think creatively and work with others? It is urgent that current policy trends be reversed and that socio-dramatic play once again become an honored part of early childhood education."

The Mental Health of Children

Anthropologist Ashley Montague summed up the importance of play this way: "The ability to play is one of the principal criteria of mental health" (Montague: *Growing Young*, McGraw-Hill, 1983).

Bryant Furlow, writing in *New Scientist*, said: "Children destined to suffer mental illnesses such as schizophrenia as adults, for example, engage in precious little social play early in life" (*New Scientist*, No. 2294, p. 28). It is not yet known whether children who do not play when young are more prone to becoming mentally ill, but there is deep concern in the mental health community that this may be the case.

Sharna Olfman, a developmental and clinical psychologist at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, says, "Developmentally inappropriate early childhood education that is insensitive to individual learning styles is on the rise. It is no coincidence that we are witnessing an unprecedented increase in the number of young children being labeled and treated for psychiatric illnesses ranging from learning disabilities and attentional disorders to anxiety and depression."

Mental illness and aggressive behavior among young children is increasing at an alarming rate. An overview of the situation can be found in a report compiled by Tarrant County, Texas, which includes Fort Worth. The report identifies a number of factors that give rise to mental illness in young children. Among them are inadequate prenatal care, lack of bonding in infancy, abuse and neglect, the impact of violent entertainment, and a lack of social skill development. The last used to be part of preschool and kindergarten education, but has increasingly dropped away with the push for academic achievement in the early years. In addition, the new emphasis on early academic achievement places considerable pressure on children. While there is too little research to be able to say that such practices *cause* mental illness, they may well be tipping the scale from mental distress to mental illness in many children (http://www.firsttexascampfire.org/C4S/ECMHFinalReport2-04.pdf).

Why So Much Pressure for Early Learning?

Why is it so important that children between three and six achieve a mastery of print literacy and numeracy, skills previously taught beginning in first grade? The usual reasons are that children need to be prepared for standardized testing, and that children from low-income families need special help to overcome the learning gap that affects many of them all through schooling.

Many policymakers and school administrators say that in order to get children ready for testing in third grade, as dictated by the No Child Left Behind Act, they must begin earlier to introduce children to formal literacy and numeracy. They hope that these efforts will help children to achieve better scores and close the educational gap between low-income children and others. While low-income, at-risk children need and deserve special attention to close the gap, there is no evidence that current methods will do that. While there is some evidence of short-term gains (that is, higher test scores) in first and second grade, there is no definitive longitudinal research that shows gains after fourth grade for children who have experienced intensive academic instruction in kindergarten or preschool.

On the contrary, two significant studies showed that low-income children from heavily academic preschools fared less well over time than those from preschools rich with hands-on, experiential learning. Research by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation is famous for showing that children who attended preschools emphasizing child-initiated

activities did much better as young adults than children who attended an academic-oriented direct instruction preschool. The students from child-centered programs were more likely to have completed high school, more likely to be employed, and much less likely to have gone to jail than those who had more academic instruction in preschool (http://www.highscope.org/Research/curriccomp.htm).

Research by Rebecca Marcon of the University of North Florida followed low-income children from several different preschool approaches through fourth grade. Her conclusions included these:

- Children in the child-initiated model of preschool demonstrated greater mastery of basic skills than did children in programs in which academics were emphasized and skills were taught.

- Sixth-grade academic achievement was enhanced by early learning experiences that emphasized socio-emotional development over academic preparation. This finding was particularly strong for males.

For abstracts of Marcon's research see http://www.unf.edu/~rmarcon/mar_abstracts.htm.

There is an urgent need to help low-income children catch up with others academically, and this challenge deserves the finest efforts this nation can make. But current policies do not provide long-term gains for low-income students, and many child development experts predict that they will be detrimental to children.

What Makes for Successful Early Education?

Many states are now considering "preschool for all," or universal preschool. This is an important step, especially for low-income children, but the big question is what kind of pre-school should it be.

Georgia resolved the issue by approving six models for its universal preschool program. What is important now is that there be long-term research to see if all six lay a solid foundation during early childhood for later learning. The children should be followed at least into middle school, for almost any model will produce short-term gains in the early years. Few, however, show long-term gains, especially when a broad-based assessment is used that looks not only at academic achievement but also at social and emotional development and the ability to use imaginative, creative thinking

The Alliance for Childhood believes that, to educate young children well, programs should include the following elements:

- Foster close relationships with adults who care for children and work with them over an extended period of time. For young children, relationship is essential to learning. "The social and emotional well-being that comes from supporting the development of the whole child is an essential element of effective academic learning," says Diane Levin of Wheelock College. "When we fail to support all aspects of children's development, academic achievement suffers."

- Respect the child's own social and ethnic background and build on the child's own experiences in family and community, including language and culture. This strengthens the child's sense of self and social context. It also enhances the learning of other children as well as that of teachers, who are continually expanding their understanding of human diversity, including the challenges of creating a diverse, socially just society.

- Offer rich experiences of oral language, including conversation, storytelling, nursery rhymes, poetry, songs, and books read aloud. Orality comes before literacy and should be strengthened in the early years, particularly with children who need language enrichment.

- Create learning environments that draw on children's innate curiosity. This helps a child learn through exploration and inquiry.

- Provide experiences that address the physical needs of the child, including the development of the senses.

- Create time and space for open-ended socio-dramatic play. Decades of research have shown the critical role of play in children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

  Dorothy and Jerome Singer of Yale University write: "Children who have developed a rich capacity for imaginative play are not only emotionally and socially advantaged, but they are intellectually advantaged as well. Indeed, decades of compelling research has documented that imaginative play is an essential building block for the academic challenges that lay in wait for the preschool child. And yet, as concern about school readiness mounts, a common but misguided response is to sideline play and introduce formal academic lessons to preschool-aged children, a trend that is promoted by current federal guidelines for preschool readiness skills." (Olfman: *All Work and No Play*, pg. 44)

- Provide opportunities for expression through the visual, musical, and dramatic arts, which allow children to discover themselves and the world and to integrate the two.

- Give children ample time for hands-on practical experiences of the world around them. This can include gardening, woodworking, cooking, and a wide array of life activities. These are both important in themselves and stimulate other growth and learning; embedded in them is a world of mathematical and scientific experience.

  Neurologist Frank Wilson has specialized in hand ailments and has researched the relationship of the hand and brain in learning. He is deeply concerned that current education trends ignore this relationship. He writes: "I would argue that any theory of human intelligence which ignores the interdependence of hand and brain function… is grossly misleading and sterile (Wilson: *The Hand,* pg. 7).

- Take children outdoors where they can discover nature and form a deep relationship with it. Research shows that rich contact with nature fosters children's powers of patient observation and creativity. It also promotes feelings of inner peace and belonging to the larger web of life.

  William Crain, professor of psychology at City College in NewYork, writes in his book *Reclaiming Childhood* of the importance of nature in children's overall learning and their general well-being: "Recent research indicates that more time in natural settings can alleviate attention problems.… [D]isadvantaged children had better attention spans after their families moved to housing with greener surroundings.… [M]iddle class children had fewer attention problems after spending time in green settings such as parks rather than non-green settings such as malls or parking lots" (Crain: *Reclaiming Childhood*, pg. 59).

- Stimulate educators and care-givers to be knowledgeable and creative and to design curriculum, classroom environments, and activities by looking first at the overall needs of children. Include parents in the educational process and encourage the adults responsible for children to observe and describe children, share what they are learning and thinking about, and discuss their questions. This process develops teachers and parents as researchers. It also encourages a broader, more valuable approach to assessment than does standardized testing.