Results of Multi-National Early Childhood Study

Early Childhood Worldwide — More Alike Than Different

an interview with David P. Weikart

For the past 12 years, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation has been coordinating an international study on the nature, quality, and effects of the experiences of children prior to formal schooling. The purposes of the IEA Preprimary Project, conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), are to identify the settings in which young children of various nations spend their time; to assess the quality of life for children in these settings; and to determine how these settings affect children's intellectual, social, and academic development at age seven. To learn some of the early findings of this research, ***Child Care Information Exchange*** *interviewed David P. Weikart, founder and president of the High/Scope Foundation for this issue. In addition, we have invited Dr. Weikart to present updated findings of this study at the* ***World Forum on Early Care and Education*** *(see pages 28 and 29) taking place in April of this year.*

Nature of the Study

Exchange: *To begin, can you provide us with an overview of how the research was conducted?*

Weikart: The IEA Preprimary Project consisted of three phases of research. The first phase, conducted from 1986 through 1992, consisted of a review of national policies and statistics on early childhood services as well as household surveys of a representative sample of families to document parents' use of early childhood services for their four year old children. Phase 1 addressed questions such as:

- What kinds of early childhood care and education do families use around the world?
- What are the factors that influence parents' choices of educational/care arrangements for their four year old children?

Phase 2, conducted from 1989 to 1998, involved collecting extensive observational, interview, and assessment data to examine children's experiences in early childhood environments, and to explore how children's developmental status at age four is related to early childhood program factors and family factors. Phase 2 addressed questions such as:

- How do children's experiences in early childhood settings relate to their developmental status?
- What are the beliefs of teachers in various nations about child development, and how do these beliefs affect children's experiences?

Phase 3, initiated in 1993 and set for completion in 2001, will examine the relationship between children's experiences at age four and their cognitive, language, social, and academic development at age seven. This final phase will address questions such as:

- What is the relationship between four year old children's experiences in care/educational settings and their age seven developmental status?
- What role might early childhood services play in preparing children for formal schooling?

Exchange: *What nations participated in the IEA project?*

Weikart: Seventeen IEA member countries participated in the study.

Each nation established a national research center to oversee the research, assembled a national staff to collect and process data, and located resources to conduct the project.

Due to various political, logistical, and financial reasons, not all nations participated in all three phases. Seven nations — Finland, Hong Kong, Italy, Nigeria, Spain, Thailand, and the United States — participated in all three phases. Eight nations — Belgium, China, Greece, Indonesia, Ireland, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia — participated in two phases. Two nations — Germany and Portugal — participated only in Phase 1.

Addressing Diversity

Exchange: *With such a diverse array of nations, were you able to develop a single set of criteria for making your assessments? How did you factor out cultural bias?*

Weikart: One of the first challenges of the project was to work with these very diverse groups to develop a common frame of reference for the study. For example, what does it even mean to be in a preschool program in say a tropical country where there are no walls on the school or a Finnish preschool where you bundle up inside for greater parts of the year — how do you fairly compare such diverse programs?

We had to resolve some natural suspicions. If we used a set framework for defining quality, we risked having the findings being subject to cultural bias. For example, a European researcher proposed as a criteria *"At what age does a child learn to control joy?"* Other countries' researchers thought it was unusual that you would want to have a child learn to control joy. On the other hand, if we went to the other extreme, we might be so loose in our focus that no matter what we happened to observe would be wonderful.

So an important early decision was to not use a specific psychological perspective in organizing the study. What we finally ended up with was a descriptive study organized around ecological factors. It's goal was to look and describe and talk about these descriptions and relationships, rather than to test any theoretical assumptions or perspective. This provided a framework upon which all nations could stand.

We agreed to develop a common set of observational and assessment tools that were acceptable to all participating nations. This was a lengthy, bumpy process. For example, in one of our language development questions, we asked children to point out the chicken coop in a group of pictures. When the various national researchers looked at the drawing of the chicken coop, they all laughed because it was an American chicken coop and didn't look anything like a chicken coop in other nations. So we had to have each nation include a representation of their chicken coop.

In another example, in the cognitive development test, we were asking for children to point out examples of *one*, *few*, and *many*. We discovered that in two countries — Poland and Indonesia — the languages do not have a specific word for *few*. So we had to modify this question.

Exchange: *What are some of the early findings coming out of the IEA Project?*

Developmental Similarities

Weikart: One of the most fascinating findings is how similarly four year old children behave throughout the world. When the IEA project was initiated, one of the assumptions was that the tremendous variations in cultural, historical, religious, and economic conditions must have an enormous impact on the way children grow and develop.

However, as the observers in the various nations started comparing notes, it became increasingly clear that, except where children are failing to thrive due to forces such as malnourishment, they all develop at about the same pace. Whether you are looking at four year olds in China, Poland, Nigeria, or the United States, children are at similar stages of development at age four.

For example, in the observations, four year old children in Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Romania exhibited similar fine motor skills, particularly as demonstrated in art projects. Likewise, in observing gross motor activities, we found children in all countries engaging in the same tasks — sliding, swinging, jumping, and playing tag.

You do not need to be a trained researcher to observe these similarities. In Phase 2 of this project, we produced a series of videos showing typical early childhood settings in 15 nations. In watching these videos, you will observe that in many ways the children appear very different — in their dress, in their physical features, and in their traditional mannerisms (such as the ways they relate to adults). However, everyone who watches these videos will be struck by the similarities in the children — how they run, jump, and manipulate materials in much the same way.

Parent-Teacher Expectations

Weikart: We were also surprised by the significant similarities in the

expectations of parents and teachers throughout the world. We asked parents and teachers what their expectations are for children and who should be responsible for meeting these expectations. We found that the expectations of parents were remarkably similar from nation to nation.

Likewise, in more than half the countries, expectations of parents and teachers within the same nation were similar. We thought that parents' expectations would be something that would cause great differences in programs, that teachers and parents would think very differently. But what we found was extraordinary similarity across the countries. For example, both parents and teachers in almost all countries expect that children will learn to relate to peers — that's the principal expectation of teachers and parents in nearly all countries.

Exchange: *Was this consistency true for all expectations?*

Weikart: Not quite. In Thailand, for example, teachers rated *self-expression* and *preacademic skills* among the most important. However, on the whole, *relations with peers*, *language skills*, and *personal self-sufficiency skills* were highly rated by parents and teachers in nearly all countries.

There was also strong agreement among parents and teachers about what isn't important. Much to my surprise, *relationships to adults* was nearly always rated lowest as an expectation, followed by *self-expression*.

Another surprising finding was the wide variance in expectations for preacademics. For example, only 3% of the teachers and only 14% of the parents in Finland rated *academic skills* among the most important; whereas in Nigeria, 75% of the parents and 73% of the teachers rated it most important.

Non-Engagement

Weikart: Another surprise we had was the amount of time children observed were not connected to what's going on — not paying attention at all. In doing our observations, we would pick four kids at random and then would observe each of them in turn for four 10-minute segments over two days. As a result, you have a total of 160 minutes of observations in each classroom. When you go through that, you organize your observations, and what you find is that some kids don't really do much of anything. For example, in one country, 25% of the time the average child is sitting in the classroom not engaged in an activity and not talking.

Exchange: *Was it only in this one country where there was so much disconnected time?*

Weikart: Actually, all countries have children who spend time seemingly disconnected. But the rates do not run as high.

Exchange: *In classrooms where this inattention occurred, were there fewer staff?*

Weikart: Disengagement was irrelevant to class size. Teaching style was the most important issue. If teachers conducted the class as a single large group, children spent time sitting, without much evidence of involvement.

Trained vs. Non-Trained Teachers

Weikart: Another surprising finding, and one that will undoubtedly upset advocates, is the small impact of training. In classrooms run by trained teachers and classrooms run by untrained teachers, differences observed in what went on the classrooms were not significant.

Exchange: *How do you account for the lack of impact of training?*

Weikart: We can only guess. Probably the training was not practical — theory is very hard to translate into action. Certainly large group size leads to situations where teachers feel they must exercise control, and this control takes precedence over active involvement. This type of teaching always looks the same to both observers and, of course, children.

Finally, few if any of the classrooms were following a well-developed model of early childhood education that offered alternative ways of classroom management. Thus, if you have a large group that must be controlled, if you believpe that children learn

best by watching and listening, or if you have no clear options, you would probably teach as the teachers do, whether or not you have taken part in training.

Parent Roles

Weikart: In all countries, it is the mothers who take care of children. The only exception was in China, where there are a few 24 hour child care services where children are taken in and boarded while parents do other things. But generally, and especially in Germany and the United Stares, mothers have the most significant role in caring for children.

Exchange: *So despite all the attention on women's liberation, it appears that men still do not play a significant role in caring for children?*

Weikart: Yes, that is correct — at least for four year olds. In no country did fathers exclusively take care of their children more than 40 or 45 minutes a day during weekdays. In Hong Kong, the average was seven minutes a day — from their perspective, fathers don't take care of four year olds at all. In the United States, fathers spend an average of 42 minutes per day with their children.

Globalization

Weikart: In analyzing the results of this research, we struggled to find explanations for why there were such similarities in the attitudes of the parents and teachers. One possibility is the impact of globalization. In many countries, parents and others feel that children need to be prepared for leading productive lives in the era of the global economy. Parents want their children to be prepared for the modern — not agrarian — economy.

And we also are convinced that there is, at least among teachers, a more international sharing of information about child growth and development. In the last 30 to 40 years, there has been a lot more systemization of what is known about children and development. As a result, there is more commonality today than you noticed 20 to 30 years ago.

Finally, and probably most profound, is the fact that children develop at the same pace around the world. More than anything, teachers' performance and parents' and teachers' expectations may be shaped by the consistent development of the children.

Profiles of Four Countries Represented in Chart

CHINA In China, a majority of preschool-aged

Selected Findings for Four Countries

Characteristic	USA		China		Finland	Nigeria
Location of Child Care/Education						
Own home	47%		63%		30%	89%
Other house	17%		5%		35%	3%
Center/preschool	36%		32%		35%	8%
Major Sponsors (other than parents)	Private organizations Religious organizations Government Educational institutions		Employer Educational institutions Government		Government Religious organizations	Religious organizations Private organizations
Adult:Child Ratio	**Head Start**	**Center/ Preschools**	**Urban Preschools**	**Rural Preschools**	**Child Care Centers**	**Preschools**
Average	1:8	1:7	1:20	1:31	1:6	1:21
Range	1:3 to 1:10	1:4 to 1:14	1:6 to 1:45	1:5 to 1:68	1:3 to 1:9	1:8 to 1:60
Teaching Expectations						
2 most important areas	Social skills with peers / Language skills		Language skills / *Self-sufficiency skills*		Social skills with peers / Self-sufficiency skills	Preacademic skills / Language skills
2 least important areas	Motor/physical skills / *Preacademic skills*		Self-assessment skills / *Preacademic skills*		Self-assessment skills / Preacademic skills	Self-assessment skills / *Self-sufficiency skills*
Parent Expectations						
2 most important areas	Social skills with peers / Language skills		*Preacademic skills* / Language skills		Social skills with peers / Self-sufficiency skills	Preacademic skills / Language skills
2 least important areas	*Social skills with adults* / Motor/physicial skills		*Social skills with peers* / Self-assessment skills		Self-assessment skills / Preacademic skills	*Self-expression skills* / Self-assessment skills

Note: Areas in *italics* indicate differences between teachers and parents. **Self-sufficiency:** caring for own needs; **Self-assesment** assesses own abilities and behaviors, develops a sense of self-confidence; **Self-expression:** expresses creatively through arts and crafts, music, dance, and/or imaginative play; **Social skills with peers:** interact and cooperate with other children; **Social skills with adults:** listens to, cooperates with, and respects adults; **Language skills:** expresses thoughts and feelings verbally; **Motor/physicial skills:** improved coordination, balance, and agility through large-muscle activities; **Preacademic skills:** learns basic concepts, improves small-muscle coordination, and begins to master skills necessary for reading, writing, and arithmetic.

children are cared for in their own homes, by either parents or relatives (e.g., grandparents). In urban areas of China, 80% or more of preschool-aged children attend preschools, called kindergartens, while approximately 20% of children in rural areas attend such settings. The major sponsors of kindergartens in China are employers, educational institutions, and the government, with employers being the primary sponsor and preschools frequently being located at the workplace. The adult:child ratios differ for preschools in urban and in rural areas. However, in both urban and rural areas, the maximum ratios present a picture of very large numbers of children per adult (urban = 1:45, rural = 1:60). When teachers and parents were asked to identify which areas of development they considered most (and least) important for children during the preschool years, teachers named *language skills* and *self-sufficiency skills* as most important. Teachers named *preacademic skills* as the least important area. Interestingly, parents named this same area (*preacademic skills*) as the most important area, and agreed with teachers regarding the importance of *language skills* for children of this age.

Nigeria

Only a small percentage of preschool-aged children in Nigeria attend either home care settings or centers/preschools. There is minimal government support of early childhood services in Nigeria. Thus, parents who use the services pay nearly the entire cost of the care/education and, consequently, only parents who can "afford" the services have access to them. The average adult:child ratio in an early childhood setting is 1:21, with the maximum ratio being 1:60. Whereas in most countries, teachers and/or parents named *preacademic skills* as among the least important areas of development for young children, both teachers and parents in Nigeria named this area of development as the most important. One interesting finding is that Nigerian teachers named *self-sufficiency skills* as the least important for preschool-aged children, a finding also at odds with the results for other countries. When queried about this, teachers noted that children in Nigeria were self-sufficient by age three and by age four were expected to care for the younger children in the family and often to begin to assist with the selling of agricultural goods produced by the family.

Finland

The Day Care Law enacted in 1973 guarantees public day care for every child between the ages of one and six years old in Finland. Services are offered in both day care centers and in family day care homes, with these services largely sponsored by two levels of government — national and local. Religious organizations also provide services for a few hours a week (playgroups) and many children attend these programs. In Finland, family policies and employment policies are coordinated resulting in different types of parental leave programs that may allow a parent to care for preschool-aged children at home. Finland has a training system for all teachers and care providers in either day care centers or family day care homes. The average adult:child ratio in child care centers is 1:6, with a range of 1:3 to 1:9. Teachers and parents in Finland were in nearly total agreement regarding the important areas of development for young children. Both groups named *social skills with peers* and *self-sufficiency skills* as the most important areas and named *self-assessment skills* and *preacademic skills* as the least important areas.

United States

In the United States, families generally use early childhood services for one of two reasons: (1) to provide care/education services while the parents are working or otherwise engaged (e.g., attending college); and/or (2) to provide early educational and social experiences for preschool-aged children. At the time of this study's data collection, the majority of preschool-aged children in the United States were attending either family day care homes or group settings (i.e., child care centers or preschools). The United States has a very diverse sponsorship system including sponsors such as private organizations/persons (e.g., ABC Preschool); religious organizations (e.g., St. Luke's Day Care); various levels of government (e.g., Head Start); and educational institutions (e.g., public preschool programs). In keeping with most general guidelines, observers noted adult:child ratios in child care centers and preschools that averaged 1:7 or 1:8. In the United States, teachers and parents agreed on the two most important areas of development for preschool-aged children (*social skills with peers* and *language skills*), and on one of the two least important areas (*motor/physical skills*).