



Developing Programs for Learning, Not Schooling

by Margie Carter

Everywhere I travel these days, people in early childhood settings bemoan the pressure they feel to increasingly focus their curriculum on academic learning. This pressure often comes from parents, genuinely concerned about their child's school readiness, especially in light of highly publicized school reform efforts to raise children's reading abilities and test scores. The pressure also resides inside these staff members themselves, naturally wanting children to succeed, and eager to counter the babysitter image and be viewed as a respectable "real teacher."

With each passing year, our early care and education programs feel more and more like school, with the children's time all scheduled into little curriculum boxes. The cozy, relaxed quality of a home-like environment no longer assures people that learning is going on. A place with couches, pillows, plants, and pets, where children spend long blocks of time in self-chosen activities, doesn't convey the impression that they are getting a head start on school. Even with the substantial research supporting developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), we haven't managed to stem the tide

that is putting very young children in school-like settings.

Teaching and Learning Versus Schooling

Across the country, there is a growing trend of public schools adding prekindergarten/preschool programs to their settings. On the one hand, we might welcome this infusion of public dollars into early childhood programs, but the trade-offs required are quite disturbing. With public school salaries and benefit packages, these settings are luring qualified teachers away from private child care programs, further exacerbating our staffing crisis.

If this trend would drive up all staff salaries in the field, it might be a useful development. However, teachers who have moved to public school settings often approach me at conferences with heavy hearts. They have alarming stories of school environments where required learning outcomes for four year olds focus on academic achievements and neglect the foundation of social, emotional, and physical development.

As early as 1980, Lilian Katz wrote, "Unfortunately, educational practices tend to lag behind what is

known about teaching and learning." I've come to the conclusion that our tendency to polarize academic learning and developmentally appropriate practice feeds this lag, that it overlooks issues of cultural values and access to power and privilege in our country.

To me, the real issues for learning and later success in school are these: how do we get programs well funded, with high parent involvement, lower ratios and class sizes, and responsive, reflective teachers who are building meaningful relationships and curriculum around the real lives, interests, and capabilities of children?

I also think Katz provides an important point of clarity when she says, "Overall, we tend to overestimate children academically and underestimate them intellectually." In my opinion, few early childhood programs are on the mark when it comes to actively engaging children's intellects, their hearts, spirits, or bodies. With notable exceptions, most early childhood curriculum tends to be boring — either trivial and irrelevant or rigid with rote teaching activities — out of the context of anything genuinely meaningful to the children or their learning.

Katz reminds us, “Young children usually do willingly most things adults ask of them. But their willingness is not a reliable indicator of the value of an activity.” The sad truth is that most of the teachers in our programs are inclined to subdue the very learning strengths children bring to our programs: active bodies, raw feelings, dramatic play, and inquiring minds. How can we alert our teaching staff to these strengths and help them draw on who children are so that curriculum creates more meaningful learning?

Rethinking Our Use of Space and Time

The optimal environment for early childhood care and education doesn't look like school. It has to engage the whole child, all of his or her needs and capabilities, and build on people, objects, and topics of interest. Learning requires ample time to discover who one is, how to make friends, work cooperatively, problem solve, and negotiate conflicts. Long stretches of time are needed to explore how things work, to develop needed skills, to investigate and uncover one's curiosities and questions, and to pursue these interests with others. Toward that end, I work with teachers to help them assess how they are specifically addressing these needs in their rooms, routines, and schedules.

STRATEGY

Assess your room from a child's point of view

Ask each teacher to draw a quick sketch of her or his room and, using the following number codes, to assess it from a child's point of view. If children aren't present, they can actually walk through their rooms with sticky note pads, putting corresponding numbers in all the places that identify each

concern on the following list. After coding their rooms with these numbers, discuss why each concern is important from a child's point of view. Finally, have the staff strategize possible changes or additions to the environments to create places where children can find and express themselves, where they can nurture relationships and their minds, thereby becoming confident learners.

- Put a 1 in all the places where I can see who I am and what I like to do, here and at home.
- Put a 2 in all the places where there are materials I can use to show what I know or to make things from my imagination.
- Put a 3 in all the places where my tired mommy can comfortably sit and talk with me or my teachers.
- Put a 4 in all the places where the wonder of the natural world can be found (i.e., animals and nature objects).
- Put a 5 in places where my teacher leaves out something special so every day I can keep trying to figure out how it works.
- Put a 6 in any place that feels sparkley, shadowy, and /or creates a feeling of magic or mystery.
- Put a 7 in all the places where I see and get to know who my teacher is — what he likes, how he spends time in his life, special people and things.

STRATEGY

Analyze schedules

Have each teaching team work together to write down their actual

daily schedule (what typically happens, not just what got posted at the beginning of the year). Then use the following color code to analyze how the children's time is being spent.

- Put a green dot in front of every time block where children are free to make choices and engage in self-directed activities.
- Put a yellow dot in front of every time block where there are limited choices or transition times.
- Put a red dot in front of each block of time that is teacher directed without opportunity for children's self-directed activity.

Compute the percentage of time devoted to each color and kind of experience for the children. Reflect on what we have learned from the new research on brain development. Consider strategies that would enhance green dot time and minimize yellow and red dot time.

Recognizing Different Kinds of Learning

If we return to the work of Jean Piaget, some of the confusion about school readiness and academic learning might get untangled. *The Piaget Handbook for Teachers and Parents* has a helpful description of three kinds of learning and what the role of the teacher is in each:

- Social learning includes the names of things, facts, and rules. This requires instruction from others, usually with an emphasis on repetition and rote learning. (In this kind of learning, I would include such things as the rules of school culture, behavior expectations, procedures, routines, and so on.)

■ Physical learning deals with the nature of objects, what they do, and how they work. Teachers provide for this kind of learning when they give children many hands-on opportunities with objects and words to describe their actions.

■ Logical mathematical learning is about discovering and inventing relationships between objects and symbols, including all the ways knowledge is abstracted and codified. Though the teacher can assist by providing objects, words, and questions, this knowledge must be constructed by the learner and cannot be taught by someone else. For instance, someone cannot teach you how to understand the concept of balance. You must experiment and experience this to create a true understanding for yourself.

If we help teachers (and parents) to understand these different kinds of learning, we can move away from the polarizing debate between DAP and academics and see what children need from adults to acquire these different kinds of learning.

STRATEGY **Explore learning with materials**

To help explore the distinctions between the kinds of learning Piaget describes, give groups of teachers different objects with learning tasks to pursue. This might include such things as puzzles, magnets, marbleworks, hoola hoops, braiding, origami folding designs, and story problems to determine which insurance plans provide the best coverage for particular families.

In the debriefing discussion, list the different experiences people describe under one of three columns

with headings naming the different kinds of learning. Consider what interventions assist or disrupt the learning process for a particular task. Finally, develop some guidelines for specific teacher behaviors to assist children with each kind of learning.

STRATEGY **Cultivate curiosity and collaboration in teachers**

Katz presents a slightly different formulation of learning areas that are relevant to the education of young children. Her four categories include knowledge, skills, feelings, and dispositions. Describing the latter, she says, “The dispositions that children need to acquire or to strengthen — curiosity, creativity, cooperation, friendliness — are learned primarily from being around people who exhibit them. It is unfortunate that some dispositions, such as being curious or puzzled, are rarely displayed by adults in front of children.”

To cultivate these dispositions and behaviors in teachers, ask them to identify a curiosity about a child’s behavior, play activity, or investigation. Have them work with colleagues to formulate these curiosities into questions. Give them a few weeks to observe and gather data and then come together to discuss their findings as a group. For instance, they could explore one of the following questions together:

- How do children use sounds in their play?
- What strategies do boys and girls use to join play activities?
- Where do children’s bodies seem too active or too big for the space allotted?

■ What questions are children asking during the day?

This activity helps teachers experience themselves as researchers, capable of co-constructing new knowledge. It enhances their disposition to be curious and parallels a model of what we want them to provide for children.

Creating Learning Environments, Not Schools

Let’s redefine what it means to get back to basics. For young children to become confident, engaged learners, they need environments and activities in bold contrast to the look and feel of traditional school settings. Their teachers need to experience themselves as inquiring and reflective learners so that they can leave behind what Carol Anne Wien calls “school scripts” and cultivate the real capabilities of children and themselves.

References

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