

another look at what young children should be learning

by Lilian G. Katz

Children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority. They show disrespect for elders, and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households.

Heraclitus (around 500 BC)

All teachers of all subjects at all levels have to address the question: What should be learned? Their answers to this question depend in part on the ages of the learners. Teachers' answers at the secondary school level are typically formulated in terms of the specific subjects they teach. Those teaching at the primary school level usually respond not only in terms of subjects, e.g., social studies, or science, etc., but also in terms of the basic skills involved in becoming proficient in reading, writing, and mathematics as well. But, how should preschool teachers answer this question?

The recent introduction of state standards for teaching and learning in the early years is one way of responding to that question.¹ These standards tend to be strongly linked to what knowledge and skills are considered essential to be ready for school. Most of the standards are stated very broadly. For example "Communicate needs, ideas and thoughts"² or "Explore quantity and number".³ Reaching agreement on such broad goals or benchmarks is fairly easy. However, the younger the children, the more challenging it is to arrive at meaningful statements about what should be learned. And making plans with the intention of achieving such standards on any particular day with every child in the group is not so easily achieved.

Four kinds of learning goals

Frequently discussions about desirable outcomes, standards, and benchmarks refer to what children

should 'know and be able to do.' Rarely is reference made to the idea that the children not only know, but also that they *understand* what they know. I am reminded of the story I was told about a kindergarten's complaint to his grandmother when he was in his early kindergarten experience that his teacher "messed up the calendar today! She put a 1 on the board instead of 32 for the number!" thereby indicating a gap between his knowledge and his understanding of the calendar. In a similar way, many official statements about standards and performance outcomes declare that "what they should know, they should be able to do." But there is no reference to the importance of children's knowledge and ability alongside eagerness to actually 'do' what they can. I suggest, therefore, that it is helpful to consider the aims and goals of education at every level in terms of four different kinds of learning goals as outlined below.

■ Knowledge and understanding

During the early childhood years knowledge includes a wide range of facts, concepts, vocabulary, stories, songs, ideas, and many other aspects of the children's culture. But the goal concerning knowledge should also emphasize the gradual deepening of *understanding* the knowledge — the facts, concepts, ideas, as they arise. Thus the role of parents and teachers, as well as older siblings and peers, is to offer answers to young children's questions, provide explanations for events and phenomena that interest them, and in many other appropriate ways, help them to make more accurate and deeper sense of their own experiences. These goals are first on my list, not because they are more important than the other three discussed below, but because they are goals unique to educational settings, though of course, children acquire much knowledge and understanding outside of educational settings.

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■ Skills

The term *skills* usually refers to small units of action that occur in a relatively short period of time and are fairly easily observed or inferred from observation, or from examining its products, e.g., graphic skills indicated by a child's observational drawing. Physical, social, verbal, reading, counting, and drawing skills are among a few of the almost endless number of skills being learned during the early years. Skills can be learned from direct instruction or by imitation when observing others in the action of applying them. Skills usually need practice to achieve proficiency.

■ Dispositions

Dispositions can be thought of as habits of mind or tendencies to respond to certain kinds of situations in particular ways. Curiosity, friendliness, or unfriendliness, bossiness, generosity, and meanness, are just a few examples of dispositions or sets of dispositions, rather than as kinds of knowledge, understanding, or skills. Accordingly, it is useful for us as teachers to keep in mind that we want children to acquire significant knowledge, understandings, and skills, and *at the same time* to develop and strengthen the dispositions to use them. For example, we want children to learn the essential knowledge, understandings, and skills to enable them to read; but we also want them, at the same time, to acquire the disposition to be readers.

Considering dispositions is not just a matter of learning to enjoy reading; rather it is having the habit of reading so that as children grow into adulthood they have the disposition to read in order to gain information and knowledge, with or without pleasure. Of course, it is not much use to have knowledge and skills without the dispositions to use them; on the other hand, it would also not be useful to have the dispositions, e.g., to be a reader or a writer, without having the necessary skills. Furthermore, if the experiences involved in acquiring the necessary knowledge, understandings, and skills to be able to read are too painful, the learner may master them, but resolve never to use them outside of the setting in which

they have been learned! In other words, answers to the question of what should be learned should include: the knowledge, understandings, and skills required to be a competent reader *plus* a strong disposition to be a reader.

Unlike knowledge and skills, dispositions are not learned through instruction or drill. The dispositions that children need to acquire or to strengthen — e.g., curiosity, creativity, cooperativeness, friendliness — are learned primarily from being around people who exhibit them. It is unfortunate that some dispositions, such as, for example, to be curious, are rarely displayed by adults in front of children. Furthermore, for dispositions to be strengthened and maintained, they must be in use fairly frequently, and appreciated by the adults and peers whose responses matter to them.

Feelings

Feelings are not easy to define, but they are experiences of which we are aware and which we can recognize. They are probably best thought of as subjective emotional states, many of which are innate, but many of which are learned from experience. Among the latter are feelings of competence, or feelings of incompetence; similarly, feelings of belonging or not belonging, feelings of confidence —

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Academic versus intellectual learning

Many of those involved in policy decision-making assume that the early childhood curriculum consists largely either of spontaneous play or formal academic instruction. It is, however, important to keep in mind that these are not the only two options for the preschool curriculum. Furthermore, that while both play and instruction can have a place in the curriculum, both positions overlook the importance of children's *intellectual* development. To highlight the contrasts, *academic* goals are those concerned with acquiring small discrete bits of disembodied information, usually related to pre-literacy skills, and practiced in drills, worksheets, and other kinds of exercises designed to prepare them for later literacy and numeracy learning. The items learned and practiced require correct answers, rely heavily on memorization, and consist largely of giving the teacher the

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correct answers that the children know she wants. These bits of information are essential components of reading and other academic competencies. The issue here is not whether academic skills matter; rather it is *when* they matter. Intellectual goals and their related activities, on the other hand, address the life of the mind in its fullest sense, including a range of aesthetic and moral sensibilities. The formal definition of the concept of *intellectual* emphasizes reasoning, hypothesizing, predicting, the development and analysis of ideas, and the quest for understanding.

With the intellectual dispositions in mind, an appropriate curriculum in the early years is one that encourages and motivates children to seek mastery of basic academic skills, e.g., beginning writing skills, *in the service of their intellectual pursuits*. In this way, the children should be able to sense the purposefulness of the activities and their efforts to find things

high or low — and so forth. Feelings about school, teachers, learning, and peers are also learned from experience in the early years.

The risks of early academic instruction

Recent research on the long-term effects of various curriculum approaches suggests that early experience of academic instruction, while it seems to yield impressive results on standardized tests in the short term, seems to have some negative effects in the long term, especially for boys^{4, 5} (Marcon). In the case of boys, it seems that the early academic instruction model that put boys into a passive role, contradicts their natural as well as cultural dispositions to be assertive, active, and in a sense, forceful. In most cultures, girls seem to be more able to accept the kind of passive roles required in formal academic instruction.



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out. While intellectual dispositions may be weakened or even damaged by excessive and premature formal instruction, they are also not likely to be strengthened by many of the trivial, if not banal (e.g., refrigerator art??), activities frequently offered in early childhood settings.

I suggest that when young children engage in projects in which they conduct investigations of significant objects and events around them and for which they have developed the research questions to find out things like how things work, what things are made of, what people around them do to contribute to their well-being, and so forth, their minds are fully engaged. Furthermore, the usefulness and importance of being able to read, write, measure, and count gradually becomes self-evident (Katz & Chard, 2001; Helm & Katz, 2001).⁶

References

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Using Beginnings
Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

Four kinds of learning goals: Divide teachers into teaching teams to tease out and write down their learning goals for knowledge and understanding, skills, dispositions, and feelings. Make sure to ask teachers to identify how, when, and where the goals are accomplished.

Is your program academic or intellectual? Do teachers understand the difference?: After reading this article, work with teachers to clearly identify the focus of your program and explore ways to make sure your curriculum allows children to fully engage their minds.

Give Dr. Katz her due!: Ask teachers to assess their classroom environment and the work of the children using Katz's criteria of being grounded in a sense of the surrounding context, engaging in worthy investigations, providing first hand experiences, learning through process, and engaging in extended activities. Then, facilitate a candid discussion about what they found out and what they plan to do about it.