

Chapter 1

The Evolution of Universal Preschool Education in a Global Age

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Abstract This chapter introduces the notion of universal preschool education as an equitable option for public schools in a global age. Discussions around six essential questions identify the various definitions of universal preschool education, examine its genesis and historical antecedents, present current international trendsetting models, and consider challenges in promoting governmental support for furthering the goal of preschool for all in the United States. This chapter serves as an international and national overview of Part I Section of the book, which focuses on two states' efforts to further universal preschool education in the United States. The chapter also touches on international and national organizations, agencies, mandates, and concepts developed in the subsequent chapters of Parts II and III. The chapter seeks to address issues in early childhood practices, while it provides pathways to move early education forward in a global age.

Keywords Universal preschool education • Historical genesis • Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) • Kindergarten education • Froebel • Elizabeth Peabody • Mandates • Collaboration and alliances • No Child Left Behind • Race to the Top • Nordic nations • Great Britain • Germany • France • United States

What Is Universal Preschool Education?

Globally, universal preschool education (UPE) is a pressing topic in educational policies and practices. Many countries have had long-term commitments to the institution of early preschool education in both their public and private

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sectors. In some countries, preschool education is seen as an entitlement (Swiniarski 2007). Others are still entertaining notions of implementation of programs that are inclusive of all preschoolers. Generally agreed upon however is the definition that universal preschool education provides governmentally provided programs for all young children to age 6.

The research and findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose member nations represent the most highly successful economies in the world, have endorsed the UPE movement (Swiniarski 2006). OECD member nations are competing to offer the best educational opportunities for their citizens as insurance for future economic growth. The multiple editions of the OECD *Starting Strong* 2001 and *Starting Strong II* 2006 publications offer an analysis of international policies and issues that note the progress made by OECD recommendations. The recent 2012 version, *Starting Strong III*, provides a “toolbox” of practical information for promoting quality practices and programs to participating nations (OECD 2012, retrieved 12/31/12). Factors such as the world marketplace, international political alliance, trade agreements, and global corporate transactions have motivated governments to revamp their educational systems to include a comprehensive early education in their school systems as necessary for a viable education in the twenty-first century. OECD’s seminal report of 1996, *Lifelong Learning for All*, set these goals for an education in the twenty-first century as it stipulates:

It is widely recognized that the early years of education play a decisive role in the a child’s future, for they shape attitudes to learning and provide basic social skills that come into place in later school years...In OECD countries early education has increasingly become a public provision and thus an integral part of the service society. (OECD 1996, pp. 113–114)

The question then arises when is the best time to begin preschool or, in other words, at what age are governments responsible for funding the education of their young children. The age range for state-supported early education differs around the globe. It can begin at birth and extend to age 6 or 8. Some member countries boast a *Birth to Five*, a *Birth to Eight*, or a *Zero to Three* model beginning at birth or toddlerhood. The majority of the OECD member nations’ children start preschool education at age 2 or 3. Interestingly, the OECD report centers not on the importance of age entrance but on the kind of provisions made for young children to ensure quality programs that meet the challenges of this global age.

It is argued that better educational use could be made of the receptivity in very young children, and that certain elementary skills such as reading, singing and playing musical instruments can be fostered much earlier. The question is not whether provision should be organized for 2 to 6 year olds, but rather, what kind of provision would ensure school readiness. (OECD 1996, p. 114)

What Is the Genesis of Universal Preschool Education?

The antecedents for universal preschool education can be traced back to the writings of Plato’s work, *Laws*. In Book V11 Plato explicitly defined the roles of UPE, which he called a sanctuary, as the responsibility of public supervision. The sanctuary’s

lessons were to begin with prenatal care of the mother and continue with support of a nurse for parents to attend the child's development from birth. Plato further recommends that each community establish this sanctuary for children, ranging in age from 3 to 6, where children can interact with each other in organized and superintended play to promote not only cognitive growth but social and emotional development (Swinarski 1976). So the tradition of early education as a public commitment has an early genesis that can be traced to the glory days of Athens and tracked throughout history. It is Plato who is often credited with the quote, "As the tree is bent, so grows the tree," which has echoed through the ages.

What Are the Antecedents of the Universal Preschool Education Movement?

Froebel and the German Kindergarten

Plato's message has been carried on for centuries through educational discourse. His writings influenced Frederick Froebel's establishment of the nineteenth-century kindergarten movement. Between Plato and Froebel (1782–1852), there were many utopian writers who linked early education as the foundation stone of state-supported education. The Roman Orator, Quintilian (935–97 A.D.) promoted early education with hiring articulate nurses who modeled language development to keep a child from becoming accustomed to incorrect language patterns that in later years have to be unlearned (Power 1970). Noted scholar and clergyman, John Amos Comenius (1592–1670), wrote a guide for mothers, *The School of Infancy* (Power 1970). While his work had a limited readership of women educated sufficiently to read, it still became a classic reference that highlighted the important role of parenthood in a child's education, the significance of play as a cornerstone for teaching and learning, and the need to universally educate all children from birth before elementary school entrance at 7.

Undoubtedly, the German Kindergarten Movement, framed by Frederick Froebel, is the prototype for universal preschool education. Although influenced by German Idealism in his basic premise, that all children are naturally good, he identifies the role of education is to unfold that goodness and knowledge innate in all. Yet, Froebel preached caution. In his work, *The Education of Man*, he created a pedagogy that put play at the center of the curriculum with *prescribed* activities and materials. He contended that children need guidance to grow and develop. He placed children under the supervision of trained guides, who, in turn, would move children along in a progressive process before error diverted the good natural tendencies. Although he respected parental influence on a child's education, he wrote books to further assist families, particularly mothers, in the education of their young. In addition to home schooling in the early years, he wanted the children from ages 3 to 7 to be also under the care of educators trained in his methods. He developed a teacher education program exclusively for women to be the professionals in his *garden of children*,

the kindergarten. He felt women were naturally suited to guide the young and trained his staff of women to be these guides. His kindergarten ideals were disseminated internationally particularly by his followers who immigrated to the United States.

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: The American Kindergarten Model

Much can be said of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–1894). She was an educator, activist, social reformer, writer, poet, publisher, and philosopher. By the time she became acquainted with the kindergarten movement, she brought to its cause not only a rich lifetime of experiences from these diverse roles but also a cadre of family members, friends, and colleagues whose ideas, ideals, and expertise influenced her role in pioneering early education throughout America.

As a young woman Elizabeth Peabody began a 20-year correspondence with William Wordsworth, Poet Laureate of Great Britain. His poetry shaped her notions of childhood and the philosophical assumptions upon which she implemented in the American kindergarten model. She was also influenced by others such as David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller, fellow Transcendentalists, the Bronson Alcott family and her own Peabody family who included her sisters, Mary and Sophia, and their husbands, Horace Mann and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Peabody's network provided vast connections that promoted the kindergarten movement beyond the doors of private schools to the public school arena.

In 1860, she established the first English-speaking American Kindergarten as a private school venture in Boston. Previous kindergartens were primarily in German-speaking enclaves for recent immigrant families settled throughout the United States. With her network in place, Elizabeth actively reformed American public education to include the kindergarten as the entrance class to public schooling. Along with Susan Blow and William Torrey Harris, then the Superintendent of Schools in St. Louis, Missouri, she campaigned successfully for tax-supported public kindergartens as established in 1873 for the St. Louis Public Schools. Funding included training kindergarten teachers to staff the classes and ensure the quality of education. These early kindergartens were for children from ages 3 to 7. The centers included parenting education as well as teacher training programs. The kindergarten programs evolved into community service providers when they later partnered with Settlement Houses to outreach all children and their families in needy urban communities and immigrant neighborhoods.

Along with Mary Mann, her sister and wife of Horace Mann, the founder of The Common Schools in Massachusetts, Elizabeth Peabody spread the word about the benefits and best practices for early education. Together, the sisters authored books, edited professional journals, and wrote parenting materials and early education texts. Promoting professionalism among practitioners, Elizabeth worked with William Torrey Harris to establish the American Kindergarten Union, based on the International Kindergarten Union (later to be known as the Association for Childhood Education International). An accomplished linguist, Elizabeth, translated Froebel and other relevant German

kindergarten theorists to network the kindergarten movement globally. She traveled across America and abroad in Europe to lecture on the movement and advocate for the education of the young child.

Keeping to Froebel's optimistic view of childhood and his universal principles for early education, Elizabeth placed her pupils under the skillful supervision of Froebelian-trained teachers that she named *kindergarteners*, whom she personally recruited to be her trainees. While she failed to persuade the famed author, Louisa May Alcott, to join the movement, she did enlist Kate Douglas Wiggin, a writer of children's literature; Lucy Wheelock, who would later found her own training college, Wheelock College; and Mary Garland, who established Garland College for women in Boston. A resourceful reformer, Peabody's ideas became embedded in early education practices that still resonate today. She promoted the extended day, multiage classes, parenting programs, professional development, and community outreach. Her kindergarten prefigured today's Full-Service School model.

Where Are International Trend Setting Models?

Great Britain

In the twentieth century, many European school systems established early education programs in their national schools. In Great Britain, building on the groundwork of Robert Owens' Infant Schools for urban children, ages 5–7, Margaret and Rachel McMillan opened nursery schools for toddlers to 4-year-olds in two of the most industrialized cities of England, London, and Bradford. The McMillan nursery schools initially were concerned with curtailing the high mortality rates of young children in Britain's cities during the Industrial Revolution of the early twentieth century. The initial centers provided basic physical care but gradually expanded their mission to promote cognitive and social development in nursery education. Gradually as a time-honored tradition, nursery schools became embedded in the English state local authority schools and beyond to those in its Commonwealth Nations such as Australia and New Zealand. However throughout Great Britain, the offerings remained sketchy and unequal. Around the end of the twentieth century, only an estimated 20 % of 4-year-olds in the United Kingdom attended local authority state nursery schools (Swiniarski 2007):

Nursery school expansion had been slow since the beginning of the century when Margaret McMillan in particular had campaigned for it and since local authorities were empowered to provide it under the 1918 Act. Some authorities made generous provision; others made none. (Lawson and Silver 1973, p. 459)

To continue this trend in 1997, Great Britain's Labour Party pushed through their Parliament provisions for universal education for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Since each young child has a right to preprimary education, grants are awarded to accredited state or private schools (Swiniarski 2007). The money follows the child. Parents

have the choice to place their child where there are openings (Swiniarski 2007). Subsequent chapters of this book will review the outcomes of this mandate, its successes and perceived failings.

France

France boasts a long tradition for providing universal preschool education in its *ecole maternelle*. Each municipality offers this schooling to all children beginning at age 3 to age 6, including 2-year-olds, who turn three within the academic year. Each *ecole maternelle* is available to children in their local community and in most neighborhoods. There is some choice for parents to send their children outside of their district, but they must petition their local authority to find or transfer to a suitable placement elsewhere. In small villages or towns, there is typically one *ecole maternelle*, while cities' offerings are dotted about community districts, wards, or *arrondissements*. Indeed, much like American families, many French parents select where to live based on the schools in their districts (L. Swiniarski, personal interview, March, 2011).

In France, the tradition of the *ecole maternelle* is distinct from the *crèche*, nursery or childcare center. The *ecole maternelle* is the entry level to school. It offers an academic curriculum beginning with 3-year-olds. One parent, who attended its equivalent in Belgium as a child, found the French *ecole* to be more demanding than what she remembers as a child. It has less playtime but does provide informal experiences in the extended day option for children of working parents. This mother selected the location of their home based on her assessment of its district's school. She expressed in a personal interview that her choice was a good one. She contended that her children appear very content in its setting, staffed by highly competent professional educators (L. Swiniarski, personal interview, March, 2011).

Italy

Italy gets many international raves for its early education opportunities in both its public model of the *Reggio Emilia Preschool* and its private Montessori *Casa dei Bambini*. The Reggio model is being replicated throughout the United States with National Association of Young Children endorsement. Like many European preschools, social constructivism is the pedagogy at center of the *Reggio Emilia* curriculum (Whitehead and Bingham 2011). Rebecca New (2001) recommended that "U.S. policy makers ...consider the widespread Italian option [as] high-quality early childhood programs.... desirable in an increasing pluralistic democratic society." Exemplary preschools have adopted Reggio's emphasis on art as the basis for successful project-based teaching/learning practices. However outside of Italy, many of these schools are in the private sector.

Montessori Schools were established universally in the private sector of early education since the early twentieth century. Today the Montessori Method has spread the movement's philosophy to public settings as well. In the United States, the Montessori Method was influential in the early development of Head Start models. Maria Montessori's work continues to influence emerging charter schools and urban public preschools with its promotion of a comprehensive methodology, her notion of children as autonomous learners, and her insistence on the involvement of families in the educational process of their children:

The model of the school in Montessori education...seems more like a miniature and eclectic university research laboratory. Montessori children pursue their own projects... choose what they want to learn... get lessons across the curriculum... pass on the fruits of their labors...[so]the child can be seen as a motivated doer. (Lillard 2005, pp. 28–29)

Nordic Nations

Generally, the Nordic nations provide preschool education under the umbrella of childcare from infancy through age 6. The nations include Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. Each nation has its own regulations, curriculum, practices, and governmental support policies.

Finland

Finland is recognized as “the first country in the world where every child has the right to enter day care” (Swiniarski and Breitborde 2003, p. 68). In recent years the Finns have decentralized their administration of early education. Centers can be found in comprehensive schools or in purpose-designed centers under each municipality's management. All children have equal opportunity to attend a childcare program or preschool before entering the comprehensive school at age 7. Because of the Finnish children's success on comparative international assessments, educators around the world have flocked to Finland to uncover the reasons for its children's high levels of test scores on international assessments. The Finns link the test successes of their students in adolescence with their quality early education offerings.

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment 2009 (PISA) results indicate that “fifteen year old students who had attended pre-primary education perform better on PISA than those who did not, even after accounting for their social-economic backgrounds” (PISA IN FOCUS 2011). Finland sustained consistently top scores in mathematics, science, and literacy on the OECD's PISA study of learning skills for 15-year-olds. The OECD assessment of 15-year-olds' achievement in reading, mathematics, and science is administered worldwide in OECD member and nonmember nations to determine the quality of educational systems internationally. The tests were first administrated in 2000 and again in 2009–2010.

Often Finnish educators are questioned on how their students maintain this level of success. They reply that the reasons are many. Finns typically cite that their teachers are highly qualified professionals in their fields, their students are not subjected to high-stakes testing, and children begin *formal* schooling at age 7 in their *mother tongue*. Furthermore, Finland has maintained a long tradition of equity in access to early education and care where play, language, and the arts are the basis of the early curriculum and balanced by goals of social and cognitive development. Academic instruction begins later at age 7 with the entrance into the comprehensive school level. Like all Nordic nations, Finland has a core curriculum that includes and guides preschool standards. The core curriculum and standards begin at the preschool level. The Finnish Core Pre-School Curriculum's pedagogy states the following:

Pre-school education shall build on the basic values of society....The role of pre-school education shall be to promote children's growth into humane individuals and ethically responsible membership of society by guiding them towards responsible action and compliance with generally accepted rules and towards the appreciation for other people. The core role of pre-school education shall be to promote children's favorable growth, development and learning opportunities...Preschool education shall guarantee equal opportunities for children to learn and start school. (National Board of Education in Finland 2001, p. 7)

Iceland

Iceland, while not situated on the European continent, is a member of the Nordic nations. Once under the rule of Denmark, it gained its independence and established its own educational system of four levels starting with nursery and preschool education and including Compulsory Schools, Upper Secondary Schools, and Higher Education. The Icelandic Preschool Act of 1994 set the policy for preschools and identified its aims as the following:

- To provide children with care, a good environment and safe facilities for play
- To give the opportunity of participating in games and activities under the guidance of preschool teachers
- To collaborate with the home to stimulate all-round development
- To encourage tolerance and broad-mindedness
- To cultivate expressive and creative powers
- To strengthen self-esteem, security and ability to solve their disagreements peacefully (Adapted from Act No. 78 of 1994, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland, retrieved 5/2/2006)

A subsequent act that revised the educational system of Iceland is the Pre-Schools Act No/2008. For continuity and consistency, this updated mandate defines preschools as the first level of the educational system for all children before entry into a Compulsory Education at age 6. Compulsory Education is organized in a single system for the primary and lower secondary levels in which children usually attend

the same school through age 15 (Compulsory School Act No 91/2008, retrieved 3/24/2012) ([European Agency for Development in Special Needs Review-Iceland](#), retrieved 12/31/12).

One exemplar of an Icelandic preschool and kindergarten education is the community of Dalur's Preschool/Kindergarten School. The school's staff visited Boston, Massachusetts, in 2012 to study Early Education and Child Care in Massachusetts and to exchange practices and policies of its institution with collaborating professionals in Boston, Massachusetts. The exchange uncovered many cross-cultural similarities. Both countries base their programs on child developmental theories to provide social development, communication skills, lifelong learning skills, and personal independence.

The Icelandic program casts play as central to all learning as "a key element in all child development programs" (Jorundsdottir and Halldorsdottir [n.d.](#)). The Icelandic delegation shared information about their school for comparative purposes. The school serves up to 94 students, 1–5 years old, operating as a full-day facility from 7:30 am to 5 pm. Hot meals are prepared on site for all of the children, namely, breakfast, lunch, and afternoon refreshments, and included in the parents' fees. The center, while open year round, does close for a 4-week summer vacation, an interesting factor noted by their American counterparts.

What Are the Challenges in Moving Universal Preschool Education Forward?

John Dewey noted that to grow and move forward in any educational reform, change is inevitable. Change brings challenges. The universal preschool education movement has its challenges. Not all early educators agree on who should determine the policies and administer the programs, what the curriculum should be, and what pedagogy promotes best practices.

The Patchwork Quilt Phenomenon

In many countries, educators talk about the *patchwork quilt* view of universal preschool education. The United States is a case in point. While there is a national model for early education in *Head Start*, it is restricted to low-income families for its services. Likewise, there is a federal mandate to provide early screening of children for identification of special needs and placement for services; yet, there is no overarching mandate at the national level to provide for public-supported preschools. Federal government incentives have spurred some states to establish universal preschool policies and programs, but the recent economic decline of 2008 has limited sufficient funding throughout all states. Openings in most states that offer preschool financial support require the families to be means tested. Much of early

education, particularly preschools, remains in the private domain. Some preschools are nonprofit, while others are for profit organizations. Tuitions are paid by families, vouchers, charities, or public funding. Preschools are housed in a variety of settings: homes, schools, centers, churches, community buildings, businesses, or hospitals in purpose built or reconfigured environments.

American preschools are administered by different bodies of governmental agencies, at the national, state, and local levels. Some states have designated early childhood mandated boards for administering and regulating public and private programs. In other states, early education is under the state's department of education or split among various agencies. Needless to say, there are many discrepancies across the country.

There are states that require public kindergarten in each school district, while other states maintain voluntary kindergartens in their communities. Kindergartens can be a half-day experience or a full school day. Some communities charge families tuitions for extended full-day kindergartens. Since preschool and kindergarten education are inequitable and not freely open to all American children, early educators cite the need for consistency in providing early year's education at the preschool and kindergarten levels for all children prior to entrance into grade one as a national goal for equity.

The Debate for the Need of Preschool Education

A second challenge is the still prevailing negative perception of preschool education as being unnecessary. Often critics of early education point to their own successes in life without the benefit of preschool. Others note the literacy gains of children from countries that do not mandate reading instruction until the elementary grades, without noting the socialization and cognitive development promoted in these nations' preschools. Families point to the cookie-cutter approaches in the institutionalized early education programs. Educators fear the *schooling phenomenon* of today's preschools and kindergartens, i.e., the emphasis on academics – which all preschoolers must read, write, and do arithmetic. Bruce Fuller (2007) in his book, *Standardized Childhood: The Political and Cultural Struggle over Early Education*, investigates the polarizing positions for and against preschool education. A sociologist, Fuller traveled across the nation, interviewed representatives on all sides of the issues, sat in many centers and classrooms, and attempted to balance the political with the social aspects of the Universal Preschool movement. He concludes:

Much is at stake in this unfolding debate over universal preschool-differing pathways for how Americans choose to raise their youngsters, the settings in which they grow up, and even for how we understand a young child's human potential. (Fuller 2007, p. 296)

The evidence from research is overwhelming supportive of the benefits of early education. Head Start serves as a standard bearer with its longitudinal studies for the past 40+ years in identifying the impact Early Education has made on people's

lives. This long-term research evidence is clearly in favor of successful practices that emerged from years of Head Start models implemented during the President Johnson's *War on Poverty* in the 1960s across the United States and later replicated around the world (Breitborde and Swiniarski 2006). Another more recent study that backs the OECD findings on the value of early education and care is the work of the former Harvard Graduate of Education Dean, now President of Smith College, Kathleen McCartney, with colleagues Eric Dearing of Boston University and Beck Taylor of Samford University. Their study shows long-term benefits as well. They were able to ascertain that "high-quality child care may provide poor kids with an academic boost that influences their learning through fifth grade" (McCartney 2009/11, retrieved 4/8/11).

The most compelling evidence for supporting universal preschool education comes from the sciences. Brain theory research studies agree that 85 % of the human brain is developed by age 5. Indeed, *Science*, the journal for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), continually promotes early education. In its 29 September 2012 issue, the association featured an article describing how "very young children's learning and thinking are strikingly similar to much learning and thinking in science [and] early learning is remarkably similar to scientific induction...it could be that much of this knowledge is not learned but innate" (Gopnik 2012, p. 1623). Since such documentation questions Piaget's theory that young children could not engage in scientific inquiry and thought, the implications of this featured study go on to promote early learning that is open and not structured:

These discoveries have implications for early childhood education and policy. In particular, they suggest that early childhood experience is extremely important and that the trend toward more structured and academic early childhood programs is misguided. (Gopnik 2012, p. 1623)

In an earlier issue of *Science*, the Institute of Child Development and Human Capital Research Collaborative of the University of Minnesota stated that "the effects of educational enrichment in the early years of life are a central focus of developmental science and are increasingly used to prioritize social programs and policies... preschool or 'prekindergarten'...programs enhance well-being in many domains and can promote economic benefits to society" (Reynolds et al. 2011, p. 36).

Additionally the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2005) supports the scientists' findings. Their publication, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*, agrees with the scientific findings in its major theme that learning is enhanced by early education experiences. British educators reinforce the American associations' conclusions as well with their research studies that found children who finish pre-k programs are less likely to need special education services in later grades. A similar conclusion was arrived by the UK National Trust Project in 2003 (Swiniarski 2007):

Overall ...a child's duration in months at preschool was related to their intellectual gains at school entry and again at the end of Key stage 1 [age 7]. In particular, an early start at preschool (between [ages] 2 and 3) was linked with better attainment and being more sociable with other children. (Swiniarski 2007, p. 24)

What Are the Exemplars for UPE Support?

State Policies and National Program Support

The arguments for and against universal preschool education cut across the divide of federal governmental rights versus state rights in Education. While funding can come from the national governmental coffers as well as from those of the states, the final decisions for preschool education funding and implementation remain in the realm of each state. Fortunately, many states are committed to endorsement.

Teach for America has extended its scope and sequence to include preschool education as it now outreaches for quality early education candidates to join in their cause to improve underperforming schools, particularly in urban and rural schools throughout America. *Teach for America* cites the Nobel Laureate of Economics James Heckman's finding that half of the 12th grade achievement gap of African American and white students are evident before kindergarten (Slayton 2010). The new goal of *Teach for America* is to breach the achievement gap of poor young children to a successful transition into the mainstreamed elementary schools (Slayton 2010). Further studies in 2007 of *Early Education for All* follow a similar suit: Low-income children who participate in high-quality early childhood education are 40 % less likely to need special education or held back a grade, 30 % more likely to graduate from high school, and twice as likely to go to college (Slayton 2010).

These endorsements speak to the need for universal preschool opportunities that enhance the childhood of every child regardless of family circumstances. The endorsements of universal preschool education outweigh its criticisms. Yet, even supportive states' mandates reflect the model to leave the decision to the family by providing voluntary preschool options. To provide the equity in education that a nation such as Finland portrays, Americans need to promote equal access to early education which is taught by highly qualified professionals who implement a curriculum predicated on developmental needs and proven practices as defined in consistent research studies.

Early Childhood Education Professionals Voice Support at International Conferences

United Kingdom

Discourse around the notions of *Readiness* in preschools, kindergartens, and child-care programs concerns early educators. In November 2011, the noted British association for the professional development of Early Year's educators, *Training Advancement and Co-operation in Teaching Young Children* (TACTYC), presented their Second Biennial Research into Practice Conference on the "questionable label of school readiness." This association brought together a range of research studies

and speakers from many corners of the globe to York, England. These educators, scholars, and researchers presented divergent ideas, debated opposing positions, and identified consensus agreements.

The conference debates looked at the multitude of definitions for readiness. Different sides of the debate considered programs that helped preschool children get *ready for school*. The presentations reported on School Readiness Parenting Programs that enhance children's academics, the need for Vygotsky's view of social play and constructivism in preschool, and John Dewey's stand against defining education as a preparation for life rather than life itself. The *Occasional Paper No. 2*, written for and presented at the conference, proposed the key position, "the significant question is not *whether* a child is ready to learn, but *what* a child is ready to learn" (Whitehead and Bingham 2011).

The TACTYC conference participants' consensus was that you can teach skills, concepts, and attitudes through a multitude of experiences that have lasting effects rather than relying on scripted curricula that drill intensely on basic skills that have a short shelf life. The conference confirmed that children need to process, create, experiment, and test limits. It supported theorists who believe the brain is a flexible functioning organ, changing through developmental experiences.

There are many ways for a young child to explore knowledge. The learning process is a journey that encourages children to engage in experiences that stimulate active minds and bodies. For example, one conference presentation demonstrated that teaching literacy skills with the long-held traditional alphabet book can still be innovatively used to provide a structure to the literacy process that enriches the child's immediate reading life and produces lasting results. When teachers allow children's voices to be heard by having them create their own alphabet books, children contextualize purposeful language proficiencies in connection to their daily lives and new found concepts. When children later share their personally authored alphabet books, they exhibit a sense of accomplishment along with their new found skills. The point of the presentation was to demonstrate how personalized learning triumphs over scripted teaching of literacy and language (Swiniarski 2011).

All the early childhood education conference participants agreed that play was the essential medium through which children learn. Play permits engagement. Through play activities, children can make choices and communicate and socialize with each other while using all of their sense modalities. Sensory play, problem-solving situations, pretend and goal-oriented symbolic play are still regarded as the core of the early childhood curriculum. Play's effectiveness is documented by years of research. Yet, by many mandated curricula, play is relegated to the playground. Its role as a means for learning has been diminished in a bureaucratic maze of scripted teaching and dogmatic assessments.

The "one size fits all" assessment tools continue to dominate curriculum reform at the elementary and secondary levels, despite professional criticisms. Testing is seeping into preschool education with codified results used as longitudinal records. The open-ended values of play identified in research findings have little regard in these accountability schemes. The conference participants proposed advocacy for more tenable choices (TACTYC 2011).

The outcomes of the conference disputed the feasibility of readiness programs that place emphasis on the academics at the sacrifice of play, the arts and social development. The attendees questioned the wisdom of a mandated readiness program which emphasizes basic skills to read, write, and do math through a standardized and often scripted preschool curriculum. While most national or state curricula are prescribing such an approach, the conference's goals sought a balanced curriculum that brought *childhood* back into the field of Early Education and Care (TACTYC 2011).

United States

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) sponsored a similar conference the following spring in March of 2012 entitled the *Global Summit on Childhood: Exploring the Experience of Childhood Worldwide*. The goal of the summit held in Washington, DC was to focus on the state of childhood. Like the TACTYC conference, the delegates, also concerned about the status of childhood in the twenty-first century, arrived at similar conclusions. The summit introduced the *Decade for Childhood* as a joint multiyear initiative of ACEI and the Alliance for Childhood. The initiative's overarching theme:

Every child in every nation deserves a childhood full of hope, joy, freedom and promise for future (ACEI 2012, p. 1)

ACEI conference presenters considered drill and direct teaching of academics in early childhood education as having an erosive effect. Educators globally noted that the increasing use of scripted academic schooling for children aged 3–6 produced limited language proficiencies. They ascertained behavioral regulatory skills are not benefitting children in preschool and are problematic for success in subsequent years. ACEI has partnered with the Alliance for Children to rethink early educational practices and make recommendations.

In its report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*, the Alliance for Childhood argues for restoring play to the curriculum for all children (Miller and Almon 2009, p. 1). The authors, Miller and Almon (p. 1), question the value of “didactic teaching of discrete skills in phonics, decoding and word recognition” [in which there are] “short term gains in test scores” but there are little gains in later years. Their report highlighted the failed *Reading First*, program cited in *No Child Left Behind*, for improving reading and literacy skills in children throughout the United States.

Reading First, the \$6 billion federal program designed to help children from low-income families, greatly increased the amount of time children spent being taught discrete pre-reading skills in kindergarten and the early grades but failed to improve reading comprehension. (Miller and Almon 2009, p. 2)

The Alliance for Childhood promotes the idea of having children initiate play under the guidance of the teacher who can “differentiate the teaching methods to meet individual needs” (Miller and Almon 2009, p. 5). Effective teachers with

a fundamental knowledge of child developmental needs are critical for insuring school success. The Alliance for Childhood contends current governmental mandated approaches have created a crisis in early childhood education with the disappearance of play (Miller and Almon 2009, p. 7). Teachers and families need to join together to restore appropriate curriculum practices and policies documented by research and time-proven traditions. The alliance has issued a Call to Action on the Education of Young Children which can be found on its website along with the prominent list of signers: www.allianceforchildhood.org (Miller and Almon 2009, p. 7).

Summary and Conclusions

There is an agreement among educators around the globe that universal preschool education is a viable choice for the education of young children. Research concurs with their conclusions. Research studies have consistently found that play-based programs, project-based learning experiences, and hands-on activities have long-term successful effects over narrowly scripted academic approaches to teaching young children. Qualitative assessments are sometimes preferable to quantitative testing. Not all learning can be data driven. Historically in the United States, early childhood education was grounded in play as the medium for teaching and learning as postulated by Frederick Froebel and pioneered by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. Originally, kindergartens were open to children from ages 3 to 7 but eventually became a voluntary entrance into the public school systems for 5-year-olds.

Kindergartens are now required in most school districts in some states. In many public school districts, kindergarten is a full-day school experience. In others, it is a half-day experience, with the option for parents to pay for an extended daily session. There are also areas unfortunately with no public kindergartens at all. Since the mandatory age for school attendance is 6 years old in most states, attending kindergarten is a voluntary choice. Unlike the original models of the nineteenth century, kindergartens are no longer focused on the developmental needs of young children. Prescribed programs, mandated standards, and direct teaching of content areas frame its current curriculum.

Young children have a few opportunities to attend public preschools in their communities. Most of preschool education is privately supported by fees and tuitions. The federal government supports a number of placements for children from low-income families in Head Start and for children with special needs in community programs. Some states are offering preschool education to families who are means tested or to children on Individual Education Plans (IEP) in innovative integrated special needs public preschools. Individual states have begun to legislate and establish universal preschool education in the public sector as a voluntary option. What is needed in American education is a cohesive, equitable preschool opportunity for all children. To achieve the goal of universal preschool education, public

action and advocacy are necessary. President Obama promised universal preschool education in his 2008 campaign (Education Week Guide 2009). His message was embedded in his educational policy issued later from the White House:

a high quality education for all children is critical to America's future....committed to providing access to a complete and competitive education from cradle through career.
(www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/)

Opportunity for including prekindergarten education support in states has been awarded through *Race to the Top* funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Public Law 111-5. For example, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is providing professional development for early educators to improve the quality of early education and care through Readiness Centers, established in regional state districts. The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care is working on mandates for a new professional licensure of Early Childhood Educators who work with children from birth to age 8. Hope prevails that President Obama's second term will shine the spotlight on universal preschool education to ensure equity and equality for all of American youngsters.

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