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Examining the Precepts of Early Childhood Education: The Basics or the Essence?

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Dr. L. Kathryn Sharp is currently teaching at East Tennessee State University. Prior to working in higher education, she taught in the public schools system. In addition to her work in teacher preparation, she enjoys engaging in professional development opportunities with in-service teachers in literacy, classroom management, and assessment. Teacher burnout and teachers' dispositions are also areas of research interest.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to encourage early childhood educators and the related professional development and research communities to become the leading voices in determining the direction of early childhood education. To support this vital, and complicated transition, this discussion revisits fundamental aspects of what is meant by *early childhood education* and intends to spark discussion and the direction needed to guide thought and action as nations begin a shift towards more affordable, universal and, most importantly, high-quality early childhood education.

Introduction

Jalongo and Isenberg (2008) described four precepts of early childhood education that offer a conceptual and philosophical starting point for an examination of what may be found at the essence of early childhood education. These precepts are:

Precept 1: Young children need special nurturing

Precept 2: Young children are the future of society

Precept 3: Young children are worthy of study

Precept 4: Young children's potential should be optimized" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2008, p. 46-49).

The current discussion examines the nature of these precepts and the potential each of these may play in responding to teacher recruitment, quality, and retention, and describes the role in

fulfilling the anticipated promise of universally implemented early childhood education standards in “high-quality” programs.

Precept One: Young Children Need Special Nurturing

“You have to do the Maslow stuff before you can do the Bloom’s stuff.”

A. E. Beck

What do we mean by “early childhood education?” Bredekamp (2011) defines this practice as, “a highly diverse field that serves children from birth through age 8” (p. 5). This is the typical age range used in research, funding formulas, curriculum, and discussions related to developmental stages. This stage has many distinctions from other age or developmental groups (e.g., elementary, middle school, secondary, etc.). This early part of the life cycle is unique and one that requires particular awareness and pedagogical approaches. In order to become productive members of society, Young children require protection and safety, as well as stable loving relationships (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2001). During the early childhood years, one of the most significant differences is the awareness of the need to approach children’s learning *holistically*. That is, we, as early childhood educators understand that cognitive development is only one aspect of the *whole child*. The skilled and caring educator understands that children’s social/emotional, physical, linguistic, and moral development are just as important as cognitive growth (<http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/KeyMessages.pdf>). These skilled and caring individuals understand that this nurturing has enormous impact on each child’s potential as a learner, a community member, and a citizen. This holistic approach is a clear distinction from the upper elementary, middle, and secondary levels. In contrast with the early childhood holistic perspective, the upper grades emphasize content learning. This difference begins during university coursework and teacher training. For example, in the upper grade ranges of teacher preparation, more coursework is focused on teaching math, science, and language arts. In contrast, early childhood education for pre-service candidates begins with studying developmentally appropriate practice and human development. NAEYC, in its position statements and standards, clearly emphasizes the consideration that must be given to developmental and cultural facets for the individual child and for groups of children (National Association for the Education of Young Children). A review of early childhood education programs reveals that the coursework and

content is rich in theory and foundational principles of early childhood. There is an abundance of information to guide us in our early childhood work, and yet, is there a need to consider the current definition for learning?

In this era of high-stakes evaluation, prevalent today is to value convergent thinking and performance on standardized tests, summative evaluations, and benchmark assessments of academic achievement. Yet, early childhood educators, guided by the first precept, provide children with special nurturing. They value creative activity, divergent thinking, and innovative problem solving. This means, instead of in-depth content, the early childhood candidate learns how to instill higher-order thinking, creative activity, and problem solving into instruction and curriculum for young children (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The dilemma for early childhood teachers is the current emphasis on assessment which contradicts the first precept stating that young children *Need Special Nurturing*.

Precept Two: Young Children Are the Future of Society

“Old men can make war, but it is children who will make history.”

Ray Merritt, *Full of Grace*

By rereading Plato’s (427-347B.C.) reasoning, we are reminded of the importance of educating young children. Plato stated children should be nurtured and educated so that the collective society benefits from having healthy and informed citizens. In turn, these citizens elevate the democracy, the economy, and the arts. This same concept has been echoed by many past theorists. Dewey (1897) underscored this belief as it relates to America in *My Pedagogic Creed*. Dewey stated, “...I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of a proper social life. I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling” (as cited in Gordon & Browne, 2007, p. 12). This “dignity of his calling” also speaks to the worthiness of children and elevates the profession. As early childhood professionals, we ask ourselves if we are following through on behalf of children’s social wellness. If not, how can we correct the narrow trajectory of the profession? This would mean that early childhood educators were professionally motivated, highly skilled and knowledgeable educators

who were supported and valued by society. It would mean that salaries are commensurate with the demands of the profession. Ultimately children, families and the general society benefit from a reassessment and restructuring of early childhood and its educators. The evidence is abundant and clear: What happens in early childhood matters! It matters to the child, to the classroom, the community and to society. It matters to the future.

Precept Three: Young Children Are Worthy of Study

To borrow from Sir Isaac Newton, those of us in early childhood education stand on the shoulders of giants.

Theorist and researchers such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Montessori, Malaguzzi, Katz and countless others made timeless contributions to the field. Again and again they offer rich information about how to best support young children in a way that optimizes their potential. Clearly since Pestalozzi and Froebel, we know that to teach children we must study them (Gordon & Browne, 2007). We learn how to teach by watching interactions. We watch how children interact with one another, how children interact with objects, and how children interact in different environments. This leads us to move away from layering on what the adult world sees as important or relevant, but instead, we seek to understand children's individual thinking. Through this lens, we honor children's unique qualities and consider the most appropriate adult response. In this way, we do not evaluate or judge, but as responsive adults, we acknowledge and dignify children's differences. We come to understand this range of difference by studying the world of children. Early childhood teachers have rich and abundant research, but we have to ask if we are using the findings to determine what is best for children. For example, Reggio Emilia, considered by many educators to be an outstanding program, is studied intensely, but where and how often are we seeing these ideas interpreted and applied into classrooms?

Early childhood research describes the positive relationship among creativity, cognition, and social learning (Koster, 2009). In order to create optimal experiences for young children, are we, as early childhood educators, using the existing research on behalf of children? If not, why not?

Ashton-Warner, Kozol, Elkind, DeVries, and many others eloquently demonstrated the value and power of studying children (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2008; Wortham, 2002). Their works are studied but how are they seen in practice and how are they ignored? As one example, Ashton-

Warner (1963) left an indelible mark on early childhood education through her study and writings, but do we celebrate children's stories? It seems rare indeed to see children's words and stories used as working material. Instead, current practice imposes commercial curricula and one-size-fits all texts and basals with "stories of the week."

It is a most relevant topic of debate to consider that there is a vast amount of research telling us how children need the time to learn and develop, they need rest, healthy foods, playtime, time to talk to each other and time to explore (Feeney, S., Moravcik, E., & Nolte, S., 2016).

It is familiar to observe kindergarten children working in isolation at tables writing out worksheets and workbooks filled with tracing and copying "learning activities." One teacher said, "We don't have time to cut and paste and all that cutesy stuff. We have too much learning to do." Are these cutesy things? At the same school a teacher explained why there are no learning centers: "Our principal doesn't allow them. He said we have too much work to do." Gone are the blocks, props for dramatic play, and listening centers. Another example of ignoring early childhood research is the removal of rest and play times for young children. For precept three, the early childhood profession is well grounded in evidence-based findings to maximize learning for all children.

Percept Four: Young Children's Potential Should be Optimized

"One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade."

Chinese proverb

We have all heard that children are the future; a simple statement, but one that should give us an impetus to pause. Yes, they are the future and part of the great lure of teaching and surely a cause for the sense of duty and purpose it should evoke. Plato (427-347B.C.) made clear statements of the reciprocal nature of civilization (or society) and education. Education should be a function of the nation, or society, and in turn, that society benefits from education. Further, Plato made straightforward statements regarding the early care and nurturing of its youth in order that the society, as a whole, is elevated in its dignity of character, but also in its scholarship and democratic

foundation (Cooney, Cross, & Trunk, 1993). Much of this foundational theory has been echoed by leading theorists, and it is apparent that how we value, nurture, and educate our children is our legacy. It is what we cast into the future. It is the harvest we plant for others to reap. Katz (2011) eloquently conveyed this precept thusly:

“I really believe that each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must come to see that the well-being of our own individual children is intimately linked to the well-being of all other people's children. After all, when one of our own children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it; when one of our own children is threatened or harmed by violence on the streets, someone else's child will commit it. The good life for our own children can only be secured if it is also secured for all other people's children. But to worry about all other people's children is not just a practical or strategic matter; it is a moral and ethical one: to strive for the well-being of all other people's children is also right” (Katz, 2011, p. 19-20).

Discussion

Are things changing in early childhood education? The good news is that education is about change—or should be. It is about learning new and better ways to do things. Early childhood education policy and practice continue to evolve in our country and around the world. Some trends are promising and others are causes for concern. One promising trend is the emphasis being placed on teacher preparation that has resulted in many states requiring teacher educators to spend much more time working in the field with mentor teachers and students to learn their craft (a “residency” experience). This is an enormous shift in thinking and one that holds great promise for a new generation of highly-skilled educators. These new initiatives call for improved collaborative relationships between teacher preparation programs and the pre-K-12th grade schools. Increasing site-based training in itself will not be the solution. These teacher candidates and even the in-service teachers will need ongoing coaching and mentoring to become the highly skilled professionals our children need. New and innovative work has been done in this area and the results are promising (Pinata, 2011). Again, bridging this gap will help new teachers develop their knowledge, dispositions and skills more effectively and will provide a much needed supply of fresh, energetic, and passionate educators to participate in schools. This isn't a pipe dream; it is an attainable goal that meshes with the time-honored precepts of early childhood. We can be certain that a great deal of the onus lies with teacher educators, those who deliver professional

development for practitioners, and the new educators entering the field. Their voices and actions have the potential to alter the current landscape of early childhood education.

Another promising trend is the additional funding early childhood education continues to receive. One of the most significant examples of this is the universal prekindergarten movement. This has resulted in improved access to education and nutrition for all children. In particular, this movement has had a great impact on minority children and children in low-income homes or those who live in poverty. The success of this movement will depend on the degree to which the standards of success are driven by early childhood educators vs. politicians. While politicians recognize the dire need for the additional funding, professional, highly skilled educators may be best suited to select instructional methods, curriculum materials, and varied assessments.

The development and availability of high-quality teaching materials, including technology resources, hands-on materials, and an amazing array of children's texts is at an all-time increase. This is a trend that gives many educators and care givers hopes for a brighter future for children. These learning materials and resources help educators provide rich and varied learning opportunities for children and their families.

There is a national focus on improving the quality of school lunches and snacks. Chef Jamie Oliver has led a "food revolution" and school lunches are at the heart of this movement. Chef Oliver put the spotlight on school lunches and revealed some very disconcerting information and organized petitions for improved school lunches. We could no longer ignore the links between nutrition and learning (<http://www.jamieoliver.com/us/foundation/jamies-food-revolution/school-food>). It is very promising that these resources and public awareness is at its peak. Michelle Obama has made exercise and nutrition her leading initiatives. Television programs, commercials, books, magazines, etc., have all spotlighted this important movement. Far too many of our nation's children are overweight, not getting adequate rest and physical activity, or malnourished. Children's health has been forced into America's consciousness, which resulted in a reexamination of our children's health and nutrition and a consideration of how wellness may impact student learning and healthy citizenry. Abundant supporting resources are available in print and online (<http://www.letsmove.gov/>).

We also know that not all trends are as encouraging. We are working in a time wherein, in many schools, prekindergarten and kindergarten-age children are not allowed time to snack, nap, or rest. We continue to learn of horror stories about young children not being allowed time to play

or to explore learning centers in classrooms so that they have more “learning” time. We have too many children in poverty, suffering from neglect and abuse (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). Consequently, we have far too many children who do not want to go to school and who cannot see the beauty of their minds and spirits. They are confined to a world of intellectual poverty while seemingly surrounded by opportunities and well-intentioned adults.

Final Reflection

Too often we seem to be in a race to skip over early childhood entirely. As a nation, we seem to be very intent on young children learning and achieving without giving adequate thought to what those words mean. As advocates, taking the time to reflect on these four basic early childhood precepts provides the language and purpose to refocus on behalf of the holistic learning required to maximize young children’s learning and development.

Please join the discussion at: <https://preceptsofearlychildhoodblog.wordpress.com/>

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