

Session I: Education Content and Skills

Rationale and Background

When considering how to improve the education and care of very young children there are many reasons to begin with a focus on the cognitive development of their knowledge and skills. While this may seem obvious to many, historically it has been a matter of considerable contention among the extensive array of caregivers dealing with preschool children, toddlers and infants in the United States. While placing priority emphasis on the education piece of early care is still controversial in this country, the discussion about what approach is best has been enriched by the publication of new research and by a growing interest in the highly successful interventions sponsored by other countries.

. Those who organized this meeting would like to explore the proposition that substance-specific and skill-specific early education should constitute the core of preschool programs. The meeting was designed to illicit a full discussion on what the educational essentials should be, and on the implications of decisions about them for the staffing of quality programs. By using this discussion as a start point, we hope to engage many of those who have been working on the underlying issues for years, as well as newcomers who may be able to surface fresh perspectives and stimulate the involvement of new constituencies.

Worth noting are a number of developments that may be driving a change in the political and intellectual dynamics surrounding early childhood education. In the last ten years, for example, we have witnessed the take off of a state level standards based reform movement in public education that continues to press for more explicit and demanding learning goals. The new standards produced by this movement have been accompanied by new assessments and extensive achievement data. Heightened expectations, together with a barrage of information, are producing ever more intensive scrutiny of when and how both student failure and student success begin. Such education organizations as the Education Commission of the States, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the American Federation of Teachers and a coalition of groups represented by the Learning First Alliance are looking more closely than ever at how both good and bad preschool experiences shape the readiness of very young children to begin school.

New research, together with powerful new reports authored by commissions of experts, have also brought added attention to the importance of educational experiences for very young children. Among the most notable of these are *Early Learning, Later Success: the Abecedarian Study*, an experimental study of the influence of systematic educational intervention on poor children beginning in infancy. The study has followed both experimental and control groups in a longitudinal examination of their progress on a range of cognitive and social variables that has lasted over 20 years. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, a report issued by the National Research Council (NRC) in 1998 included extensive advisory discussion on preschool language development and what "accomplishments" children should attain and various ages. And, at the end of

2000 NRC published *Eager to Learn*, a report aimed specifically at the need for improvements in educational content and staffing for the preschool years.

Finally, the impact of international comparisons on the current policy dialogue has for years carried considerable weight among experts in the field. Information about these systems and their apparent influence on school readiness is now attracting the attention of a broad swath of educators, child welfare advocates and policy-makers. The influence of similar international comparisons in pressing the standards based reform agenda in public education was huge and may serve as a predictor for the power of comparative study in crafting new early childhood policies. The most examined preschool system is that hosted by France, a country whose national system of *ecoles maternelles* offers all children in France a consistent, quality introduction to early learning.

In choosing this focus and in noting these developments we are mindful of the warnings from those who are concerned that preschool not become school. We are sensitive to the fact that early learning is about social and emotional development and that changes in these spheres must be integrated with, and mutually supportive of, cognitive growth. We know that this requires methods and settings that differ from those used for school-age children.

Inquiries Initiated for this Session

Institute staff began preparation for this first discussion by attempting a consideration of how clearly and specifically both states and the Head Start program define learning goals for literacy. Literacy is the only area we tried to review because it is arguably the most important, and because it is hard to have an exemplary concrete discussion about too many learning areas.

Together the state standards that govern programs, and Head Start as the only federal effort that offers quality guidelines, constitute the major government sources for advice on cognitive growth expectations for literacy. Staff also collected selected articles and data about the French system's directives to the *ecoles maternelles* about content and skills.

The U.S. review was informed by two exercises. The first involved a closer look at 2 states, Georgia and Missouri, as the only 2 states that approve privately developed and state-described "curricula" as regulatory advice to program administrators. Together the two states approve 7 programs: High Scope, Bank Street, Montessori, Creative Curriculum, High Reach, Project Construct, and Scholastic Workshop. To these we added the curriculum used for the Abecedarian study and the Preschool Sequence developed by the Core Knowledge Foundation because of their apparent relevance and reputation. We asked each of the curriculum developers how their curriculum was likely to produce results related to the specific learning accomplishments for literacy outlined in the NRC's 1998 report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, and the new Head Start performance objectives issued in August 2000. The second exercise was to find out which states offered their own expectations for what content and skills children

Readings

Session I: The Issue of Education and Content Skills

Summary

Background Memo, Albert Shanker Institute Staff

Other Materials

“Bridging the Gap Between Early Childhood Education and Primary Education” by Mary Jean Le Tendre, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 1999.

“Curriculum and Pedagogy: The What and the How of Early Childhood Education,” *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*, National Research Council, 2000.

“Georgia and Missouri Guidelines for Approving Early Childhood Curricula,” Georgia and Missouri State Departments of Education.

“HSIPC-2000 Head Start: Child Outcomes, Performance Measures, Program Self-Assessment,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, August 2000.

“Is Head Start Smart?” by Diane Ravitch, *The New Democrat*, July 1998.

Programmes de l' école primaire française (English Translation), Centre National De Documentation Pédagogique, 1996. (in pocket)

“Making a Modernist Pedagogy: Changes in Elementary and Pre-Elementary Schooling,” by Martine Kherroubi and Eric Plaisance, *Journal of Educational Policy*, 2000.

“Pre-K Curriculum Guidance From State Departments of Education,” Albert Shanker Institute Staff

Excerpts from *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council, 1998.

