

Introduction

Education is an arena of hope and struggle—hope for a better life and struggle over how to understand and enact and achieve a better world. We come to believe that we can become makers of history, not merely the passive objects of the great human drama.

BILL AYERS

Never has there been a more important time for us to ask ourselves what we believe the purpose of education to be. The future of American democracy may well depend on it. Do schools and early childhood programs primarily exist to produce compliant workers for economic function? Or is the goal to help children grow into their full potential as informed, engaged citizens eager to make a contribution to their communities? Do educational goals narrowed to test scores prepare children to be successful in an increasingly complex world? Should early education focus solely on children's futures or does providing enriched childhood experiences give them a better future?

The answers to these questions determine the approach to curriculum in early childhood education programs. Should teachers design curriculum to remediate children's needs and deficits, or should they focus on children's inherent competencies, ideas,

and questions? Can stronger policies and curriculum mandates really improve learning outcomes? Or should the emphasis be on improved working conditions, salaries, and teacher education to support the role of teachers in children's learning? What are your views on these questions?

Education always represents a philosophical and political point of view and serves a particular agenda. The task for educators is to know our history, probe deeper, ask critical questions, and find the ground we want to stand on. Engaging in this critical thinking process has brought us to stand with the voices for progressive education. We first came to the teaching profession in the 1970s, a time of great upheaval, but also of great promise. Ordinary people, such as ourselves, our friends, our fellow teachers, and our neighbors, were engaged in lively debates about where we wanted to take our country. We saw ourselves as

makers of history, not passive citizens giving up on America's failure to live up to our democratic ideals. It was an exhilarating time—a time of rage, joy, determination, dancing, and singing—a time of great hope. A fierce sense of possibility first brought us to work with young children and here we are, many years later, clamoring again at the gates of hope.

Perhaps you, like us, came to work in the early childhood field because you wanted to secure the future for young children, and because you wanted to be reminded of the joy and passion for living that young children offer nearly every minute. But in the United States today, childhood, early childhood education, and the teaching profession are under siege, with so much conspiring to diminish our dreams. Educational policies are taking us away from the joy we once felt. Educational authorities want us to believe education should be about teacher-proof, mandated curriculums, high stakes testing, and conformity. The energies of teachers and administrators are pulled toward an avalanche of regulations and accountability systems.

We say, “*Basta!*” We can do better than this for our children and ourselves.

QUESTIONING CURRENT THINKING AND APPROACHES

We know this problem is complex, and simple solutions do not exist. A number of factors contribute to problems in current approaches to early curriculum for children. Here's what we think is currently wrong with the way early childhood education is being conceptualized in the United States:

- Definitions of quality are inadequate.
- Factories serve as a model for education.
- Teachers lack philosophical foundations.
- Authorities view children as needing to be “readied” and fixed.
- Play is not considered a viable source of curriculum.

- Child-directed and teacher-directed approaches are presented as opposed and mutually exclusive.
- There is no infrastructure to support teachers' reflective practice.
- Teachers and programs are required to adopt quantifiable “research-based” curricula.

•PROBLEM• Definitions of Quality Are Inadequate

In the United States, decade upon decade of research, professional efforts, and advocacy have attempted to demonstrate and put into place the components of good experiences for young children. Despite the substantial body of research demonstrating that quality early childhood experiences are directly related to healthy brain development and to social, emotional, and cognitive maturity, the status of early care and education in the United States is a national crisis, and should be a national shame. As policy makers begin to recognize the links between early education and academic success, they have marginalized our professional knowledge and decision-making power, and directed quality reform efforts toward measurable outcomes and high stakes testing. And, as is the custom in U.S. culture, commercial interests then swoop in with quick-fix, easy solutions—so-called teacher-proof curricula, time-saving literacy strategies, tools that take the guesswork out of assessment. “No need to worry or trouble yourself with thinking too hard about all this,” is an appealing message for distraught educators. It is also a big source of our problems.

If teachers are to take charge of the direction of early care and education, they must begin to ask, “What is quality?” and the more important question, “Who gets to decide?” What assumptions, values, and agendas do you want to guide efforts to revamp early care and education in the United States? Each community and early care and education organization must undertake an open discussion of its purpose, and the values, philosophy, and theoretical frameworks it wants to guide everyday program practices.

Stone Soup

Family provider Donna says she considers “layers of value” when choosing what curriculum ideas to pursue. “We are so ambitious for the children and for ourselves! Because we have a relatively small amount of time with the kids and want that time to be meaningful, I strive for what I call at least ‘three layers of value’ in everything we choose to take up. By this I mean, when our goals for children are self, community, nature, skills, and dispositions about work and play (such as risk-taking, persistence, passion, curiosity, and joy), then anything we plan must relate to at least three of these areas. For instance, we once made Stone Soup with the children and invited the children’s families to the feast. Reflecting back on the activity, we decided it had so many layers of value that we wanted to keep it as a tradition. The process and tradition of making Stone Soup includes working with food in its raw, natural form; the connection between story and the lives we actually live; developing skill with paring knives for work that would be appreciated by the people we love the most in the world; integrating food that came from each person’s home into one big pot of soup we all eat together; and there was even singing, math, writing, and drawing. It was rich. Worth our time, worth the children’s time. The curriculum we pursue and traditions we adopt help define our program culture. They have to resonate with our values at a high level of detail.”



Children First

As we’ve traveled across our own country, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, we’ve been enormously inspired to see dedicated early childhood professionals reminding us that something else is pos-

sible. In many places we have seen what deep respect for children can look like, what securing the future for our children can look like, what an educational system based on wonder, curiosity, joy in learning, focusing on relationships, and engaged investigation looks like. Sadly, most of these models are not visible to the everyday early childhood practitioner, or they are dismissed because they have privileged resources and are viewed as elitist. We are particularly impressed with the strong government support for progressive-minded early childhood education some nations offer. New Zealand, in particular, shows us how a country can face a history of injustice with a serious refocusing of resources toward a bilingual, bicultural early childhood education system.

• PROBLEM • Factories Serve as a Model for Education

Despite the lip service to individualized learning (and in some cases the genuine efforts of programs to be child-centered), most child care and Head Start settings in the United States resemble a factory model with a culture of compliance, schedules, and mandated curriculum components. Monitors focus on paperwork and crunch numbers to ensure accountability. Teachers move children through the day as if they are cars on an assembly line. Neither the teachers nor the children are afforded time to ponder, wonder, and make meaning out of the day’s activities. Increasingly, teachers are given scripts to follow. Some early childhood commercial curricula even market themselves like one-minute managers proclaiming, “This lesson will only take five minutes of your day.” You should question why that might be a good thing. If it’s worth learning and adding to your program, doesn’t it deserve more time? What about the learning that comes from really slowing down and paying attention to what you are undertaking?

Perhaps there is no greater influence in the teaching and learning process than how time is viewed and used (Phillips and Bredekamp 1998). We live in an era shaped not by the rising and setting of the sun and moon, as in eons ago, but in an era when technology

and a sense of urgency speed up everything we do. This cultural reality slips into early care and education programs with policies and mandates that fragment our time into little boxes on a schedule. Carole Anne Wien (2004) suggests that because we are so removed from the rhythms of the natural world, we approach time with a linear, not cyclical, mindset. Examining the use of time and allocating it closer to your values and human development knowledge is one of the most important undertakings for early childhood educators.

An unhurried pace fosters a sense of security and possibilities, while a rushed one creates stress, fragmentation, and a sense of discouragement and resignation. When you slow down, you see more; you allow more time for relationships to grow and thinking to deepen. Research has shown that children need at least thirty minutes to engage fully and reap the benefits of their play and exploration (Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey 1987). If teachers want children to be learning social skills in group times; acquiring language and nutritional knowledge during eating times; developing coordination, strength, and neurological connections while outside; and expanding their knowledge of materials, others, and themselves in their play activities, why are they continually rushing children on to something else? It isn't mere exposure to these things that heightens the possibilities for development and learning. Rather, children need time to really immerse themselves in these areas if meaningful learning outcomes are to arise.

•PROBLEM• Teachers Lack Philosophical Foundations

In the United States, most teacher education efforts within the early childhood realm happen in the in-service, instead of pre-service, arena. Directors feel fortunate if they can hire a teacher with an associate's degree. In-service training for teachers is typically focused on "how-to" skills, at best attached to some understanding of child development. Seldom do these teacher education efforts raise philosophical concerns or challenge teachers to question the purpose of education.

We believe that teaching strategies should flow from a consciously defined belief system, not a set of regulations, a series of activity books, or a bag of tricks. Your curriculum and teaching behaviors reflect a set of assumptions about your view of children and your role as a teacher, whether or not you have examined these underpinnings. Taking the time to understand and clarify your own values and understanding of education, and those of your coworkers, will form a more thoughtful, effective teaching practice. When you are clear about the ideas and values you want to guide your teaching, you will be less likely to drift down a side stream or jump on a runaway train headed somewhere you don't really want to go. With this clarity, you will find more intellectual vitality and heart energy in your work.

Learning Together with Young Children derives its philosophical orientation in the tradition of progressive educators such as Jerome Bruner, Carol Brunson Day, John Dewey, Maxine Green, Asa Hilliard, Jonathan Kozol, and a host of other important voices. We believe, as they do, that the purpose of education is to live into a true democracy, to flourish in our humanity, and—as the educators of Reggio Emilia remind us—to find depth, meaning, and joy in the teaching and learning process. The pedagogy we champion is strongly influenced by our study of Jacqueline Grennon Brooks, Lisa Delpit, Eleanor Duckworth, Erik Erikson, Paulo Freire, Friedrich Froebel, Howard Gardner, bell hooks, Elizabeth Jones, Loris Malaguzzi, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Carlina Rinaldi, and Lev Vygotsky. We mention these names to acknowledge some of those who have inspired and taught us, but there are many others, too numerous to mention. We suggest you take it upon yourself to learn more about these pioneers, and the related approaches to education with names like "social constructivism," "empowering or participatory education," "critical pedagogy," "multiple intelligences," and "inquiry-based learning." Grounding yourself philosophically is essential to developing a pedagogy and curriculum approach that reflects your beliefs and goals for living and learning with children. (See the appendixes for tools that will help you with this process.)

• PROBLEM •
**Adults View Children as Needing
 to Be “Readied” and Fixed**

The concept of school readiness is full of complexity. On the one hand, whatever their circumstances, children are born eager to learn. However, failing to recognize this, adults immediately impose their wills, perspectives, and agendas on children, in some cases inflicting neglect or abuse. Traditional approaches to education have viewed children as empty vessels to be filled instead of recognizing the existing knowledge they bring to learning opportunities. When children fail to thrive in our educational settings, educators think children need remediation or, even worse, some punitive action. In most cases, it is the curriculum or pedagogy that needs fixing, not the children.

Fortunately, a number of teachers embrace a strength-based approach to education. Educators from Reggio Emilia in Italy, among others, challenge us to see the competency of each child, to believe in children, and to commit ourselves to helping them reach their potential.

• PROBLEM •
**Play Is Not Considered a Viable
 Source of Curriculum**

In today’s world, play-based curriculum approaches are increasingly viewed with skepticism. In part, this is because children’s play is often not what it used to be. Consequently, there are good reasons not to trust it as the natural purveyor of learning for a range of domains—dispositional learning, language and literacy, math and science, and so on. Unfortunately, television, electronic media, and commercial toys have invaded young children’s play, often supplanting it with commercial scripts and agendas. Children have limited time to acquire play skills because their lives are scheduled from the time they wake until they go to bed, with very little freedom or time outdoors (Louv 2005). No wonder so many children don’t learn how to independently investigate, invent, or problem solve with any complexity.

Teachers, too, have contributed to a mistrust of children’s play as a vital source of learning. When children engage in self-initiated play, teachers don’t always recognize the learning possibilities unfolding or know how to facilitate play for deeper learning. They lack confidence in articulating learning outcomes embedded in children’s play. Furthermore, their own education hasn’t prepared teachers to recognize cultural differences in how children learn through play (Neugebauer 1999).

However, the early childhood profession has long recognized that play is important for children’s growth and development. In “Chopsticks and Counting Chips,” Elena Bodrova and Deborah J. Leong (2004) cite a body of research on the value of play, concluding, “Studies show the links between play and many foundational skills and complex cognitive activities, such as memory, self-regulation, distancing and decontextualization, oral language abilities, symbolic generalization, successful school adjustment, and better social skills.” In particular, they delineate the study of Daniel Elkoinin (1977) who identified four principal ways in which play influences child development and lays the foundation for learning in school.

1. Play affects children’s motivation, enabling them to develop a more complex hierarchical system of immediate and long-term goals.
2. Play facilitates cognitive decentering as children take on roles in their play and negotiate different perspectives.
3. Play advances the development of mental representations as children begin to separate the meaning of objects from their physical form.
4. Play fosters the development of deliberate behaviors—physical and mental voluntary actions—as children learn to sequence actions, follow rules, and focus their attention.

Elizabeth Jones (2004) has written extensively about the roles teachers assume in supporting children’s play as a source of learning. “Teachers support play by providing a variety of things to do, observing what unfolds, and staying nearby to help as needed and

to acknowledge children's actions and words . . . We teach young children to play by providing them with space, time, and materials; offering them support in problem solving; presenting new problems for them to solve; paying attention to their spontaneous interests; and valuing their eagerness to learn about the world in which we all live together." Contrary to the prevailing wind, then, we believe children's play is both an essential learning tool for young children, and deeply affected by the quality of the teaching environment in which it takes place. It's worth finding the resources to help teachers learn to do the deep work of preparing for, encouraging, supporting, and building curriculum from children's play.

•PROBLEM•

Child-Directed and Teacher-Directed Approaches Are Presented as Opposed and Mutually Exclusive

For too long, early childhood educators have used "either/or" thinking, juxtaposing child-initiated play against teacher-directed curriculum. Proponents of emergent curriculum have adopted a hands-off approach, mistakenly believing that an emergent approach requires teachers to wait for children to initiate a curriculum idea. Conversely, advocates of the direct instruction approach have overlooked the learning that can emerge in children's play, believing children can't learn unless they are taught by adults. With the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act many teachers have brought dittos and drill-and-practice teaching back into early childhood classrooms, believing this is the way to ensure school readiness.

The tension between these two approaches has been heightened by the dynamics of racism, poverty, and privilege. White, middle class children are raised with the expectation that they will self-initiate and tend to do well with this curriculum approach. This is less true for children of color and low-income families who often grow up with a cultural expectation that they will learn what to do from their teachers (Delpit 2006).

We've come to understand that dichotomizing child-directed and teacher-directed curriculum approaches is an over-simplification of the complex

process of teaching and learning. Sue Bredekamp and Teresa Rosegrant (1995) describe these as a continuum of teaching behaviors, acknowledging that a curriculum responsive to children, as well as desired learning goals, requires a teacher to move across this spectrum. To determine a helpful teacher behavior at any given juncture, teachers need a relationship with the children and their families, and attention to the details of what is unfolding in the classroom. We propose that teachers master a repertoire of possible actions that can be used as a protocol for guiding children's learning, including both skills in supporting and extending child-initiated activities, and expertise in teacher-directed curriculum. When they are guided to learn this repertoire and supported by a program culture that invests in and trusts them, teachers become effective facilitators of learning.

•PROBLEM•

No Program Infrastructures to Support Teachers' Reflective Practice

The culture of most early childhood programs reflects an insidious mentality of compliance and scarcity. Teachers are viewed as technicians accountable to an ever-growing body of standards and curriculum content. Simultaneously, budgets for teaching staff are carefully limited to meeting ratios with children and adhering to labor laws. Most accredited programs give teachers paid time for weekly planning and annual professional development opportunities. While this is a step in the right direction, it is hardly adequate for teachers to do their job well. Our earlier book *The Visionary Director* offers an extensive set of ideas for creating a program that goes beyond meeting requirements or delivering curriculum to children.

In today's education world, with increasing emphasis on standards and outcomes, a bigger vision can seem like pie in the sky. Sometimes, the force of one person or small team can push a vision forward, but without an infrastructure to support the actual work of living into a vision, sustainability is difficult. Teachers and administrators burn out, become cynical, or give up. Moving a program toward the curriculum approach proposed by this book requires a close

examination of your organizational culture and suggests a new approach to your professional development. It isn't appropriate to just require teachers to start adopting some new practices. To support teacher efforts and ongoing professional growth, organizational systems, policies, and distribution of resources will likely need some realignment.

• PROBLEM •

Teachers and Programs Are Required to Adopt Quantifiable “Research-based” Curricula

Teachers have a range of curriculum models to choose from, many of which address current educational thrusts and policies aimed at measurable learning outcomes. Increasingly, programs find mandates requiring them to adopt a quantifiable, scientific, “research-based” curriculum. These mandates should prompt us to ask questions such as these: Who are the researchers? What is their cultural framework? What research methodology and measurement tools were used? Is there any one research methodology that is reliable for all children (NAEYC 2007)?

Thanks to the work of the educators of Reggio Emilia, many early childhood teachers in the United States are being encouraged to see themselves as researchers (Meier and Henderson 2007; Gallas 1994). In light of this possibility, why would anyone adopt a curriculum that gives a script for teachers to follow? In contrast, Deborah Meier and Barbara Henderson (2007) suggest that teacher education involving teacher research holds great promise for improving reflective practices.

We find value in curriculum models that are environmentally based, see children as active learners, offer children choices, encourage teachers to build curriculum from children's interests, and use ongoing observations with a focus on strengths for assessments. We believe curriculum should strengthen children's identities as thinkers and responsible citizens as well as creators of a life-sustaining culture. Curriculum should be developed in conjunction with children's families and communities and be respectful of their culture and home language. Over the years we have gained insights from the curriculum approaches

promoted by the British Infant Schools, Bank Street College in New York, and Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, and our colleagues at the High/Scope Foundation, Teaching Strategies, California Tomorrow, Reggio Emilia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The early *Alerta* curriculum (Williams and De Gaetano 1985) and the more recent bilingual, bicultural curriculum approach offered by Sharon Cronin and Carmen Masso (2003) have offered us important insights into culturally relevant programming for young children.

While we understand why a scope-and-sequence curriculum model might appeal to those mandated to adopt a formal curriculum, we encourage you to consider whose interests are served by doing so. We have seen far too many programs where more attention is paid to scripts for outcomes than to what is most significant from the children's and teachers' points of view. It is also worrisome to see training focused on how to deliver a curriculum instead of how to think through the complexities of the teaching and learning process. Again, who benefits and who loses with the promotion of a “teacher-proof” curriculum? Teachers who only focus on carrying out the curriculum and completing their paperwork ultimately lose heart and question whether they want to stay in the field. Defining your work around issues of compliance will lead you to feel like a victim and deaden your spirit. And, such a misguided focus could ultimately undermine your ability to create a vibrant learning community in your early childhood program. There are other, more rewarding choices you could make.

A Learning Organization

Consider this story of a Head Start director who told us of the hours and hours she spent researching a curriculum to adopt for her program.

Teresa narrowed the curriculum choices down to three, carefully studied all the materials, and met extensively with each of the companies' representatives. Though all of the curriculum packages under consideration were comprehensive in their scope-and-sequence approach, she found pieces in each that were problematic for the approach to curriculum and assessments that she wanted to unfold in her program. Teresa was devoting this part of her early

childhood education career to creating what Peter Senge (2000) calls a “learning organization,” a Head Start agency that nurtures the thinking abilities of parents, staff, and children. She believed any lock-step, sequenced, “teacher-proof” curriculum would undermine this goal. Teresa agonized over how in good conscience she could justify spending close to a hundred thousand precious taxpayer dollars to adopt this kind of curriculum for her large agency with multiple sites, many human resource needs, and a series of budget cuts coming down the pike. Finally, though anxious about potential misinterpretations and findings by her upcoming federal review, Teresa made the brave choice not to adopt any commercial curriculum. Her decision was guided by her vision for her program and the values she couldn’t compromise. And, in the end, her federal review team agreed with her approach.

You might have a different story. You could be saddled with a curriculum model that has already been adopted for your program, all or some of which seems counter to the approach you would like to take. Perhaps you are a family provider or a teacher in a program with no clear philosophy or curriculum approach guiding your work, independently sorting out how to structure your time with children. Have you been inspired by the stories of the in-depth curriculum work from the schools of Reggio Emilia but can’t imagine how to implement such an approach in your setting? As a family child care provider or an infant and toddler caregiver, you might be struggling to understand how to keep your home-like focus while still embracing this notion of curriculum and ensuring that children are learning during their time with you. You could be a preschool teacher diligently trying to integrate the new content-driven curriculum resources addressing standards for math, science, language, and literacy and losing heart trying to juggle it all. Whoever you are, we want to address your concerns, inspire you, and strengthen your ability to live fully and teach well.

A NEW WAY

Our aim with this text is to put a spotlight on curriculum practices that are meaningful for children, as well as their teachers. We offer you a curriculum framework with a repertoire of possibilities to engage deeper learning. Our goal is to demystify some big theoretical concepts and offer a way to think about the teaching and learning process that is emotionally and intellectually engaging for teachers and children. During a recent seminar, a provider asked us, “Are you talking about a way of teaching or a way of living your life?” We could only smile and answer, “Yes.”

With all the demands and ups and downs of working in the early childhood field, how does one approach the job with a lively mind and spirit? What will fuel your passion and your determination not to be confined by a narrow understanding of who children are and what they deserve from us? How can you rise above constraining requirements, limited time, and limited resources to develop more significant experiences for the children and yourself? Whether you are an early childhood student, family child care provider, center-based teacher, administrator, or teacher educator, this book attempts to help you find your own answers to these questions and to strengthen your ability to think through the complex issues of the teaching and learning process.

We want you to see yourself as an inventor who can demonstrate a better way to meet desired learning outcomes and in the process, nourish the heart of your teaching and the vision of what early childhood education could be. Whatever your context, you can use these ideas to deepen your intellectual and emotional engagement in your work. You and the children will find living and learning together a more joyful experience. You will contribute to a revitalized democracy where people have the desire, skills, and opportunity to make contributions, think critically, negotiate conflicts, and invent equitable solutions that respect our planet and all its inhabitants. *Learning Together with Young Children* invites you to take back the joy and meaning of the teaching and learning process. Consider it a call to action.