The Washington Post

Answer Sheet

Report debunks 'earlier is better' academic instruction for young children

By Valerie Strauss April 12

The debate about appropriate curriculum for young children generally centers on two options: free play and basic activities vs. straight academics (which is what many kindergartens across the country have adopted, often reducing or eliminating time for play). A new report, "Lively Minds: Distinctions between academic versus intellectual goals for young children," offers a new way to look at what is appropriate in early childhood education.

The report was written by Lilian G. Katz, professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she is on the staff of the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting. She is past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the first president of the Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children. Katz is currently the editor of the online peer-reviewed trilingual early childhood journal *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, and she is the author of more than 100 publications about early childhood education, teacher education, child development and the parenting of young children.

In her report, published by the nonprofit group Defending the Early Years, Katz says that beyond free play and academics, "another major component of education – (indeed for all age groups) must be to provide a wide range of experiences, opportunities, resources and contexts that will provoke, stimulate, and support children's innate intellectual dispositions." As the title of the paper indicates, Katz makes a distinction between academic goals for young children and intellectual goals. What's the difference? She writes:

> **ACADEMIC GOALS**
> Academic goals are those concerned with the mastery of small discrete elements of disembodied information,usually related to pre-literacy skills in the early years, and practiced in drills, worksheets, and other kinds of exercises designed to prepare children for the next levels of literacy and numeracy learning. The items learned and practiced have correct answers, rely heavily on memorization, the application of formulae versus understanding, and consist largely of giving the teacher the correct answers that the children know she awaits. Although one of the traditional meanings of the term academic is "of little practical value," these bits of information are essential components of reading, writing, and other academic competencies useful in modern developed economies, and certainly in the later school years. In other words, I suggest that the issue here is not whether academic skills matter; rather it is about both when they matter and what proportion of the curriculum they warrant, especially during the early years.

INTELLECTUAL GOALS

Intellectual goals and their related activities, on the other hand, are those that address the life of the mind in its fullest sense (e.g. reasoning, predicting, analyzing, questioning, etc.), including a range of aesthetic and moral sensibilities. The formal definition of the concept of intellectual emphasizes reasoning, hypothesizing, posing questions, predicting answers to the questions, predicting the findings produced by investigation, the development and analysis of ideas and the quest for understanding and so forth.

An appropriate curriculum for young children is one that includes the focus on supporting children's in-born intellectual dispositions, their natural inclinations. An appropriate curriculum in the early years then is one that includes the encouragement and motivation of the children to seek mastery of basic academic skills,e.g. beginning writing skills, in the service of their intellectual pursuits. Extensive experience of involving preschool and kindergarten children in in-depth investigation projects has clearly supported the assumption that the children come to appreciate the usefulness of a range of basic academic skills related to literacy and mathematics as they strive to share their findings from their investigations with classmates and others. It is useful to assume that all the basic intellectual skills and dispositions are in-born in all children, though, granted, stronger in some individuals than in others...like everything else.

Katz writes that longitudinal studies of the effects of different kinds of preschool curriculum models debunk the seemingly common-sense notion that "earlier is better" in terms of academic instruction. While "formal instruction produces good test results in the short term," she says, preschool curriculum and teaching methods that emphasize children's interactive roles and initiative may be "not so impressive in the short run" but "yield better school achievement in the long term."

That reflects a finding in a report released earlier this year, titled "Reading in Kindergarten: Little to Gain and Much to Lose," which says that there is no evidence to support a widespread belief in the United States that children must read in prekindergarten or kindergarten to become strong readers and achieve academic success. You can read about that report here.

Katz also writes in the new report that "earlier is better" is not supported in neurological research, which "does not imply that formal academic instruction is the way to optimize early brain development." Rather, she says, the research suggests that "preschool programs are best when they focus on social, emotional and intellectual goals rather than narrow academic goals" and provide "early experiences that provoke self-regulation, initiative and ... sustained synchronous interaction in which the child is interactive with others in some continuous process, rather than a mere passive recipient of isolated bits of information for stimulation."

Katz says that "intellectual dispositions" of young children may actually be "weakened or even damaged by excessive and premature formal instruction" and that they are "not likely to be strengthened by many of the mindless, trivial if not banal activities frequently offered in child care, preschool and kindergarten programs." It is "incumbent" upon schools, she writes, to connect with high-risk students "in terms of the unique aspects of intellect and dispositions that they bring."