

Lively Minds:

Distinctions between academic versus intellectual goals for young children

Lilian G. Katz, PhD
University of Illinois
Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting



The extent to which academic instruction should be a major goal of the curriculum for preschool and kindergarten children is a constant topic of debate among the many parties concerned with early childhood education. The introduction of local, state and national standards has exacerbated the complexities involved in resolving these issues. I am suggesting that perhaps one approach to resolving some of the dissention concerning curriculum focus in the early years and about the potential risks of premature formal academic instruction is to examine the distinctions between academic and intellectual goals – perhaps during all the years of education.

Some participants in these debates assume that we confront a choice between a traditional preschool curriculum that emphasizes spontaneous play plus many simple activities, (e.g. creating objects with clay, building with blocks, listening to amusing stories, and other pleasant experiences) versus introducing and emphasizing formal instruction on basic academic skills and knowledge (e.g. the alphabet, days of the week, names of the months, the calendar, counting, etc.).

The main argument presented here is that the traditional debates in the field about whether to emphasize so-called free play or formal beginning academic instruction are not the only two options for the early childhood curriculum. Certainly some proportions of time can be given to both of those kinds of curriculum components. **But in the early years, 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.**

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. These would include, for example, the disposition to make the best sense they can of their own experiences and environments. 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.

SCHOOL READINESS AND THE INTELLECT. There are two further points to emphasize in connection with the importance of intellectual goals. One is that it is widely assumed that because some young children, especially those of low-income families, have not been exposed to the knowledge and skills associated with ‘school readiness,’ e.g. have not had experience of using books, etc., that they lack the basic intellectual dispositions such as to make sense of experience, to analyze, hypothesize, predict, as do their peers of more affluent backgrounds. Such children may not have been read to or to have observed adults habitually reading, or perhaps have never yet used a pencil at home. But I suggest that it is reasonable and perhaps also helpful to assume that they too usually have lively minds. Indeed, **the intellectual challenges many children face in coping with precarious environments are likely to be substantial and often complex.** It is incumbent upon the school to connect with them in terms of the unique aspects of intellect and dispositions that they bring.

Secondly, **while intellectual dispositions may be weakened or even damaged by excessive and premature formal instruction,**



they are also not likely to be strengthened by many of the mindless, trivial if not banal activities frequently offered in child care, preschool and kindergarten programs. I visited a school district in one of our Western states not long ago in which the kindergartens had adopted as a theme for the year “Teddy Bears” - a whole year!! In the classroom visited, the children were to take turns “showing and telling” about their own teddy bears, to count the number of them in the class collection, to measure the lengths and weights of the items, define their colors, and to make up stories with them as main characters. While such activities are probably not harmful and may even – at least briefly - be fun for the children, they are unlikely to be intellectually provocative, engaging or stimulating. By contrast, when young children engage in projects in which they conduct investigations of significant objects and events around them, for which they have developed the research questions and by which they themselves find out how things work, what things are made of, what people around them do to contribute to their well-being, and so forth, as can be seen in many reports of project work in the early years (see reports of projects in each issue of **Early Childhood Research and Practice** <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu>)¹, **their lively minds are fully engaged**. Furthermore, the usefulness and importance of being able to read, write, measure and count gradually becomes self-evident (See also Katz & Chard, 2000; Helm & Katz, 2001). We need significant meanings as the center of education. **Significant meanings through action-based learning environments provide reasons for children to represent experiences through many formats and deserve to be the center of education.**

THE SHORT-TERM VERSUS LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF EARLY ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION.

While many academic skills are both useful and essential, the question to raise here again, is a developmental one; namely: at what point in the course of development are academic exercises most appropriate? We all agree with the proposition that learning to read -- and in the processes of doing so, acquiring the disposition to become lifelong readers -- is a major educational goal. But just when this process should be started and with what formality and intensity raises many questions among those concerned with our youngest children (Carlsson-Paige, Almon & McLaughlin, 2015).

No doubt one of the factors accounting for increasing concern and effort to formulate clear desirable outcomes and standards for preschool programs may be the growing recognition of the role of stimulation in early brain development. However, **Blair’s analysis of neurological research does not imply that formal academic instruction is the way to optimize early brain development**

(Blair, 2002). On the contrary, Blair proposes a neurobiological model of school readiness based on his analysis of recent neurological data, the implications of which are that preschool programs are best when they focus on social, emotional and intellectual goals rather than narrow academic goals. On the basis of his model, **an intellectually rather than academically focused approach is most likely to yield desirable “school readiness” as well as longer term benefits**. Blair’s analysis emphasizes the positive role of early experiences that provoke self-regulation, initiative, and what he calls 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.

Furthermore, **the common sense notion that “earlier is better” is not supported by longitudinal studies of the effects of different kinds of preschool curriculum models**. On the contrary, a number of longitudinal follow-up studies indicate that while formal instruction produces good test results in the short term, preschool curriculum and teaching methods emphasizing children’s interactive roles and initiative, while not so impressive in the short term, yield better school achievement in the long term (Golbeck, 2001, Marcon, 2002; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993).

There are two points to emphasize about the implications of these data. One is that it is mainly in the long term that the disadvantages of early formal instruction become apparent. The disadvantages are not usually observable in the short term. To some unknowable extent the apparent short-term benefits of formal instruction are related to the extent to which the curriculum covers the items that are on the tests. Preschoolers who do not have formal academic instruction on items that are on the tests are - not surprisingly - unlikely to perform well on them.

Another issue here is that early formal instruction, in the long term, is more damaging to boys than to girls. Explanations for this finding are not entirely clear. One possible explanation is the well-known fact that girls mature neurologically slightly earlier than boys. However, another explanation may be that girls in most cultures generally learn to accept a passive role early and accept passivity more easily than do boys. On the whole in most cultures, boys appear to prefer active and interactive experiences and to be visibly assertive.

¹See also a description of a project with four- and five-years olds “All About Balls: A Preschool Project,” It can be accessed at: <http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/poptopics/project/allballs.pdf>



CONCLUSION

Taken together, these sets of distinctions suggest that, depending on the extent and intensity of it, introduction of formal academic instruction in the preschool years may not be in the best interests of many of our children, and in fact, may be damaging to some of them in the long term. **I suggest that early childhood curriculum and teaching methods are likely to be best when they address children's lively minds so that they are quite frequently fully intellectually engaged.**

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Lilian Gonshaw Katz, PhD

Lilian G. Katz is Professor Emerita of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) where she is on the staff of the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (CEEP). Dr. Katz 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. She is currently Editor of the on-line peer reviewed trilingual early childhood journal, *Early Childhood Research & Practice* (English, Spanish & Chinese).

Professor Katz is author of more than one hundred publications including articles, chapters, books, pamphlets, etc., about early childhood education, teacher education, child development, and the parenting of young children. For 13 years she wrote a monthly column for *Parents Magazine*.

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