

Early Childhood Education- A new U.S. priority, but now what?

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Introduction

One would be hard pressed to find a person who did not recognize the value of a high quality early childhood education program. President Obama has also recognized this value and made universal access to early childhood education a priority in his State of the Union Address.¹ He asserted, “Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But today, fewer than 3 in 10 four year-olds are enrolled in a high- quality preschool program.”² He stated for our nation’s poor children, who typically need the most support, the lack of preschool education can follow them for their entire lives.³ The President continued by asserting, “Every dollar we invest in a high-quality early childhood education can save more than \$7 later on, by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime.”⁴ Finally, to address the problem of funding, he proposed that the federal government work with the states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America.⁵

With everyone in the United States in agreement about the importance of a quality preschool education, the question remains where do we go from here? How are we to

¹ Obama, Barack H. “State of the Union Address.” 2013 State of the Union. Capitol Building. Washington D.C. 2. Feb. 2013.

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

implement this new facet of public education when the current system has so many problems?⁶ What should this new system look like? Should we simply copy the existing system with small modifications for younger students? This paper seeks to address the following questions by looking at preschool systems that have been successful abroad, Reggio Emilia system in Italy and the Finnish educational system. Adapting proven systems, with certain modifications, can provide the success critics say is missing from the existing Head Start Program.⁷ This article will proceed by first highlighting the current U.S. early childhood education system. Then, second, the article will explore the Reggio Emilia system followed by the Finish system. Lastly, the article will discuss how the U.S. can incorporate some of the best aspects of the Reggio and Finish systems into a new U.S. universal high quality preschool system.

I. The current U.S. “universal” preschool system

Currently, Head Start and Early Head Start are the only federal programs that address early childhood education within a classroom-learning context.⁸ Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children ages’ birth to 5 from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development.⁹ The Head Start programs focus on the following skills: language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, physical development and health, social and emotional development,

⁶ Forbes, John Converse Townsend, *How Should We Rebuild the U.S. Education System?*, available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ashoka/2013/02/15/how-should-we-rebuild-the-u-s-education-system/>

⁷ Olsen, Darcy Ann. “*Universal Preschool is No Golden Ticket.*” CATO Institute, 9 Feb. 1999.

⁸ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/head-start>

⁹ Id.

and approaches to learning.¹⁰ Head Start also provides individualized health, nutrition, social services and other services determined to be necessary by a family-needs assessment.¹¹ Head Start was founded on the assumption that children develop in the context of their family and culture and “parents are respected as the primary educators and nurturers of their children.”¹²

Early Head Start, as a precursor to Head Start, has been operational since 1995.¹³ This program is designed to help children, infancy to three years, from low-income families based on the federal poverty level.¹⁴ These services include prenatal services as well services to the entire family.¹⁵ With the success of the Birth-to-Five-Pilot, a new program incorporating both Head Start and Early Head Start funding, harmonizing Head Start with Early Head Start into one program seems inevitable.¹⁶

A. How Head Start students learn

Teachers are responsible for completing lesson plans based on established weekly themes from the Head Start Curriculum.¹⁷¹⁸ Two examples of such themes are woodland

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

¹² Head Start Bureau, 1997 p.1

¹³ Office of Head Start, *History of Head Start*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/history-of-head-start>

¹⁴ Office of Head Start, *History of Head Start*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/history-of-head-start>

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, *Head Start Grant Opportunities Expand Successful Birth-to-Five Pilot Initiative*, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/press/head-start-grant-opportunities-expand-successful-birth-to-five-pilot>.

¹⁷ Telephone Interview with Charlene Smith, retired Head Start instructor (Aug. 1, 2013).

¹⁸ Head Start, Helen H. Taylor, *Curriculum in Head Start*, available at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/early-learning/curriculum/CurriculuminHea.htm#currExcerpt> from; See also

animals or zoo animals.¹⁹ Classrooms are organized into sections called centers.²⁰ The centers included: housekeeping, library, writing, water/sand table, computer, manipulative area, math, large group area, and art.²¹ Teachers are responsible for ensuring that all aspects of the centers engage the students and were connected to the theme for that week.²² For example, teachers and students might read about woodland animals in the large group area, later the students might use a pencil to trace a picture of a woodland animal, and the students may participate in a counting activity in the math area using different types of woodland animals.²³ Classrooms must also be print rich environments, thus everything in the classroom is labeled. Teachers are also required to take students on numerous field trips. Using the above example, the students might visit an exhibit or petting zoo that contains woodland animals.²⁴

B. Student Assessment

Because Head Start students cannot write, assessments of their progress are different than those in primary public schools. Teachers and aides facilitate assessments around student interactions in the various centers.²⁵ Teacher's aides observe student interactions and use those observations to determine whether students understand the material. This type of documentation is loosely based on the Reggio Emilia pedagogical documentation.²⁶ Teachers then comprise all of this documentation, including written assessments by teachers, student work, and pictures, into a portfolio used in parent-

¹⁹ See Telephone Interview *supra*.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Telephone Interview with Charlene Smith, retired Head Start instructor (Aug. 1, 2013).

²⁶ *Id.*

teacher conferences.²⁷ During these conferences teachers explain the portfolio in a linear fashion to demonstrate student development to the parents.²⁸ Once students graduate from Head Start this portfolio is updated to include any weak areas and sent to the student's kindergarten teacher.²⁹

C. Areas for improvement

Head Start allows students to develop at an individualized rate and pace.³⁰ Each center enhances a specific area of cognitive growth.³¹ However, this highly individualized approach hinders standardization. Thus many critics of Head Start argued during the implementation of No Child Left Behind that there is no teacher accountability.³² However, teachers are subject to unannounced evaluations by supervisors or center managers.³³ Teacher accountability can be related back to teacher qualifications. Individuals are eligible to become Head Start instructors after the minimum completion of an Associate's degree or Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate.³⁴ However, now there is a greater push for more qualified teachers and thus the qualification standards have been raised.³⁵ Head Start is funded by taxpayers, "Some

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Id.

²⁹ Id.

³⁰ Id; but see also note 18

³¹ Id.

³² Id.

³³ Id.

³⁴ Head Start, *Statutory Degree and Credentialing Requirements for Head Start Teaching Staff*, available at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/IMs/2008/resour_ime_012_0081908.html.

³⁵ Head Start, *Statutory Degree and Credentialing Requirements for Head Start Teaching Staff*, available at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/IMs/2008/resour_ime_012_0081908.html.

people say that Head Start is a waste of taxpayer dollars but I have seen students that I taught go on to have success not only in elementary but also in high school and college.”³⁶

II. Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia is a city located near Milan, Italy and is known for its commitment to early childhood education. Reggio Emilia’s system developed out of necessity in the aftermath of WWII when parents started schools.³⁷ The Reggio system is based on the social constructivist theory that assumes that children and adults construct their knowledge through interactions with people and the environment.³⁸ Additionally, Reggio Emilia educators believe that all children have the capacity to learn that is fueled from their natural curiosity.³⁹ The Reggio Emilia system is supported by the local municipality and also by the Italian Constitution, which guarantees a right to an education.⁴⁰

A. How students learn in the Reggio Emilia system

Similar, to the U.S. Head Start system, Reggio Emilia students are taught through experiences.⁴¹ The Reggio Emilia experience is unique in that children are seen as

³⁶ Telephone Interview with Charlene Smith, retired Head Start instructor (Aug. 1, 2013).

³⁷ Arleen Threasa Dodd-Nufrio, *Reggio Emilia, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey: Deipelling Teachers’ Misconceptions and Understanding Theoretical Foundations*, 39 *Early Childhood Educ. J.* 235, 235 (2011).

³⁸ *Id.* at 325-36.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Art. 34 Costituzione [Const.] (It.)

⁴¹ Arleen Threasa Dodd-Nufrio, *Reggio Emilia, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey: Deipelling Teachers’ Misconceptions and Understanding Theoretical Foundations*, 39 *Early Childhood Educ. J.* 235, 235 (2011).

architects of their of their own learning.⁴² If a student displays interest in an area, then teacher will focus upon that area, for example an interest in the sun.⁴³ The students could paint a picture of a sun followed by a class discussion describing the sun, which would be use in a poem for their individual portfolios.⁴⁴

B. How student progress is assessed and areas to improve.

Pedagogical documentation as used by Head Start originated with Reggio Emilia.⁴⁵ Pedagogical documentation begins with active listening, engagement, and promotes the idea of the school as a place of “democratic political practice by enabling citizens, young and old, to engage with important issues, such as childhood, child-care, education and knowledge.⁴⁶ These results are recorded in portfolios and are shared not only with the parents but also with the community at large because learning and education is seen as part of the community.⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that there have never been studies to evaluate the success or failure of the Reggio Emilia system.⁴⁸ However, Amelia Gambetti, Executive Coordinator of Reggio Emilia has stated that in the last four years none of the students have been retained.⁴⁹

⁴² Arleen Threasa Dodd-Nufrio, *Reggio Emilia, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey: Deipelling Teachers' Misconceptions and Understanding Theoretical Foundations*, 39 *Early Childhood Educ. J.* 235, 235 (2011).

⁴³ Sherelyn R. Kaufman, (Jul 2013). Lecture given during Comparative Education Law and Policy: Early Childhood Education.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Gunilla Dahlberg, *Pedagogical Documentation: A Practice for Negotiation and Democracy*, ONE HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN ("OHLC") CH. 12, 225.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 226.

⁴⁷ See Kaufman lecture *supra*

⁴⁸ See Nufrio *supra* at 236.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

III. The Finnish system

The Finnish have gained international acclaim for its educational system and it has been called the “best in the world”.⁵⁰ This undoubtedly includes the early childhood educational sector as well. The Finnish government has put through a series of measures to ensure that all Finnish children receive a quality education.⁵¹ Among those provisions are maternity and paternity leave as well as providing for job security during leave.⁵² “Finland uses Nordic Welfare state principles and methods. In the Nordic Welfare model social security is based on the state’s responsibility for its citizens, and welfare services are arranged and funded by central and local governments. Access to services is based on citizenship; you need not to work or have an insurance to get services.”⁵³ The compulsory school age is 7 and pre-primary education is free for all Finnish children.⁵⁴ Pre-primary is considered to be ages 1-6 years old.⁵⁵ Parents can choose from private, municipal, or at home care. Interestingly, if parents choose home day care they can receive a stipend from the Finnish government.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ The Huffington Post, *Best Education In The World: Finland, South Korea Top Country Rankings, U.S. Rated Average*, available at

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/27/best-education-in-the-wor_n_2199795.html.

⁵¹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Miho Taguma Ineke Litjens Kelly Makowiecki, *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care: Finland 2012*, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/49985030.pdf>

⁵² Id. at

⁵³ National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health STAKES, Jyväskylä Satellite Office, Liisa Heinämäki, *Early Childhood Education in Finland*, p. 3 available at

<http://www.fnf.org.ph/downloadables/Childhood%20Education%20in%20Finland.pdf>

⁵⁴ Id.

⁵⁵ Id.

⁵⁶ Id.

A. How Finnish students learn and their progress accessed

The goals of the Finnish early childhood education system are: promotion of personal well being, reinforcement of considerate behavior and action towards others, and the gradual build of autonomy.⁵⁷ Parents and teachers work together to develop an educational plan specific to each child.⁵⁸ Teachers, do not teach to a test, instead they attempt to inspire a love for learning.⁵⁹ Teachers provide extra assistance to students who need it, and retention almost never happens.⁶⁰ The curriculum from pre-primary school is therefore designed to be fluid and encourage curiosity and active learning, “The core curriculum stresses the importance of care, upbringing and education as an integrated whole for young children. Beyond this focus, no requirement about specific pedagogies is imposed. The new guidelines stress the importance of Finland’s Early Childhood Education and Care in the educational continuum as part of lifelong learning.”⁶¹ In Finland, there is a national curriculum but there are no national standards that are evaluated using standardized testing as known in the United States. As noted above, even Head Start evaluates students on a standardized system. It can be argued that Finnish student perform better than American students, even at the early education stage, due to the extreme emphasis placed on standardized testing in the United States.

⁵⁷ Id.

⁵⁸ Id.

⁵⁹ Smithonian.com, LynNell Hancock, *Why Are Finland's Schools Successful?*, available at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-Schools-Successful.html>.

⁶⁰ Id.

⁶¹ OECD, *STARTING STRONG II: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE* – ISBN 92-64-03545-1 OECD Annex F (2006), available at <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/37423404.pdf>

IV. Improving the United States early childhood educational system

The U.S. early childhood educational system can benefit from reducing rigid teaching structures that limit the instructors' ability to engage their students. Head Start is a great program but teachers are forced to tailor classrooms and lessons to very specific and strict guidelines. Departing from these regulations can cause a site to lose its federal funding.⁶² This rigidity affects both the instructor and the student, limiting the learning experience to facts and memorization. The system, as it stands today, does nothing to encourage a thirst for learning. These inflexible standards are a precursor for "teaching to the test" which has become a major problem in American primary and secondary schools.⁶³ Adopting approaches similar to the Reggio Emilia and Finnish systems, would allow students to keep the natural curiosity and thirst for learning each is born with. Specifically, Head Start should allow for more student-lead learning. For example if a student displays an interest in the clouds, the teacher should have the flexibility to modify their lesson to encourage that curiosity.

Additionally, the overuse of standardized testing using nationalized standards must also be addressed. The U.S. educational system, generally, can benefit from less standardized testing. One standardized test is sufficient to test students' understanding of course materials. More standardized testing of preschool children should not be an aspect expanded into the universal pre-school system. Teachers should be able to determine what skills they test their students on and not have to rely exclusively on nationalized standards. Furthermore, preschool students should be acquiring skills that will build a

⁶² U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, *Policy and Regulations*, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/policy>

⁶³ Popham, W. James, *Teaching to the Test?*, 58 *Educ. Leadership*, 16-21, 16 (2001).

foundation for success at the primary and secondary level, not memorizing age appropriate facts used for standardized testing. But, because it is highly unlikely the U.S. would eliminate nationalized standards, the U.S. should look to the Finnish national early childhood education standards for guidance in restructuring for more flexibility and less testing.

Lastly, more faith in the highly qualified and trained American teachers can lead to better educational outcomes. Teachers are trained for at least four years before they begin their teaching careers and many choose to continue their educations while teaching, yet there is still a prevalent distrust of American teachers. In order for the U.S. education system to improve, faith in American teachers must be restored.

V. Conclusion

Scholars, educators, parents, and politicians have realized the importance of early childhood education. The basic skills taught at a high quality preschool, give students a strong foundation, which can lead to overall success in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. In his State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama has made universal access to early childhood education a priority for his administration. Adapting key successful elements from proven systems, with certain modifications, can provide the success critics say are missing from the existing Head Start Program. Adopting approaches similar to the Reggio Emilia and Finnish systems, would allow students to keep the natural curiosity and thirst for learning each is born with. This thirst for learning can contribute to the overall educational experience of the student and can contribute to a more successful learning career.