

Early education is not child's play^[1]

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EXCERPTS

AS PARENTS, TAXPAYERS, and legislators consider how best to invest in early childhood, we need more clarity about what a high-quality preschool program looks like and we need to train – and compensate – teachers so they can deliver the early education that young children deserve.

While there are lots of lovely and nurturing programs, too few are truly high-quality. Despite Boston's access to research from top universities and international scholars, the best practices have not reached most early childhood education.

Too many programs are still little more than overly stimulating colorful play spaces with draw-a-rainbow worksheets and primary-colored plastic toy bugs. What children need instead are classrooms that are true early learning labs.

Even with significant brain science on how we learn, too many schools are only offering canned curricula, instead of teaching in a way that responds to children's interests. Even with an innovative economy all around us, children are still working on discreet skills in isolation reflective of an industrial manufacturing age, rather than on collaborative projects that require them to use a range of skills that they need in the 21st century information age.

Teachers are also being short-changed. While some are educated in top universities and have access to rich professional development opportunities, others cannot afford college tuition and don't have access to the ongoing education that fuels teachers' professional growth. Unless we face these differences, we run the risk of letting too many children have subpar educational experiences.

Allowing inequality in teacher training results in inequality for children. So while children in top schools are exploring light and shadow, other children are sitting through an uninspired lesson on weather charts. While some children are exploring natural materials in the outdoors, other children are only cutting out paper apples. While some children are designing instruments, others only get to listen to a CD of "The Wheels on the Bus."

To address inequality and enrich early education and early educators, we need a clear, inspiring vision. That's what we have in "The Wonder of Learning Boston 2018." It's an internationally recognized, 7,000-square-foot, multimedia exhibit that features the work of northern Italy's acclaimed Reggio Emilia preschools.

Reggio Emilia sees children as equal participants in their own education. Reggio's classrooms look like professional art studios. And Reggio teachers engage children in learning by drawing on research-based teaching strategies as well as on community resources, from nature to local street life.

In the words of Reggio Emilia founder Loris Malaguzzi, "Our task regarding creativity is to help children climb their own mountains, as high as possible." He called on well-compensated teachers to be researchers, paying more attention to how children think and how their curiosity can shape their own education. This approach has become an international example of excellence, and countries with the most innovative early childhood programs make sure all their teachers study this approach.

The "Wonder of Learning Exhibit" brings this opportunity to Boston. With free and low-cost options, the exhibit and its related conferences have drawn large numbers of educators, including preschool teachers who cannot afford to travel to Italy. The exhibit has welcomed family childcare providers, Head Start teachers, and public school preschool teachers. They have now had the same, equal opportunities as visitors who have come from Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Finland, and Canada to see the exhibit.

By showing what could be, the exhibit and its related professional development events are also inspiring shifts in practice. This shift helps break down the stereotype that progressive education is only for wealthier children — or that play- and inquiry-driven activities are only for children who already have the necessary skills.

None of these gains matter, however, for the child whose teacher has not seen this exhibit or similar approaches. But there's still time left. The exhibit runs through November 15th at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Development, and we hope every teacher who can will visit.

It is time to make sure that our preschools are as innovative as our best colleges and universities. We can create exceptional classrooms

where highly-trained teachers support children as they grow, invent, explore, and prosper. We need to begin by giving all teachers the chance to see high-quality early education in action.

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