

How federal early childhood education standards are increasing inequality^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A guest blog published today by the Washington Post in Valerie Strauss' regular "The Answer Sheet" is both a fascinating and alarming indictment of how policy people are screwing up education. The article is by a group of career educators and professors specializing in early childhood.

The article outlines in very specific, eloquent, and compelling terms what is wrong with current federal mandates for early childhood programs. The critique is drawn from the work of the Defending the Early Years coalition, a group whose "principal concern is defending children's right to play, grow, and learn in an era of so-called standards and accountability."

As the *Post* piece states, DEY's concern is that:

...Federal Race to the Top policy mandates on early childhood education are undermining education practice that research tells us is in the best interest of young children's optimal development and learning.

Here is DEY's logic:

1. Current standards are not based on knowledge of child development — both how children learn and what they learn.

The standards require that children learn specific facts and skills — such as naming the letters — at specified ages. This has led to more teacher-directed "lessons," less play-based activity and curriculum, and more rote teaching and learning as children try to learn what is required. Yet decades of research and theory tell us that young children learn best through active learning experiences within a meaningful context. Children develop at individual rates, learn in unique ways, and come from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds. It is not possible to teach skills in isolation or to mandate what any young child will understand at any particular time.

2. Current policies support an over-emphasis on testing and assessment at the expense of all other aspects of early childhood education.

Already strapped for time and money, schools turn valuable attention and resources toward preparing teachers to administer and score tests and assessments rather than meet the needs of the whole child. As teachers strive to raise test scores, they increasingly depend on scripted curricula designed to teach what is on the tests. We know,

however, that children learn best when skilled and responsive teachers observe them closely and provide curriculum tailored to meet each child's needs. Standardized tests of any type do not have a place in early childhood education, and should not be used for making decisions about young children or their programs. Individualized assessments of each child's abilities, interests and needs provide teachers with the information they require to individualize teaching and learning.

3. Cumulatively, current policies are promoting a de-professionalization of teachers .

The growing focus on standards and testing disregards the strong knowledge base early childhood teachers have. It undermines teachers' ability to teach using their professional expertise, to provide the optimal, individualized learning opportunities they know how to offer. Instead, teachers are often required to follow prescribed curricula taught in lock step to all children. At the same time, more teachers without strong backgrounds in early childhood education are being hired, increasing the dependence of teachers on standardized tests and scripted curricula.

The full article is worth reading, especially as it talks about ongoing efforts -- including a large scale teacher survey -- to continue to understand the impact of policy mandates on the work of early childhood educators.

But there is also an important implication that needs to be mentioned regarding socioeconomic inequality.

The federal standards that DEY says are screwing up early childhood education are only screwing up the learning opportunities for some children: those attending federally funded early childhood programs like Headstart or public school pre-K.

If DEY is right, then these 3- and 4-year-olds are not learning how and what they should be learning for their age. Their experience--which translates to their intellectual and emotional growth and ultimately abilities--will be vastly different from their peers who are in private pre-school. How much individual learning, circle and story time, art, creative play, imagination and exploration can occur when you have teachers being forced to teach standardized tests? The answer is very little.

Federally funded early childhood education exists to rectify the huge disparities that already exist between families who can afford to pay for private school and those who cannot. As Jennifer Rokosa at the Center for American Progress has pointed out:

Poverty saddles children with a seemingly insurmountable disadvantage at perhaps the most critical time in their lives. Early childhood is the single most prolific period of development for children—90 percent of a child's brain growth occurs between birth and the age of three. Children in poverty, however, frequently do not have access to the same educational and developmental resources as their counterparts from higher-income families during this vital time. Researchers estimate, for example, that children from professional families are exposed to 45 million words by the age of four, while children from working-class families only hear about 22 million. Children in poverty, however, are exposed to a scant 13 million. Further, more than two-thirds of poverty-stricken households do not possess a *single* book developmentally appropriate for a child under five. The inequality is startling, and this early disadvantage is only compounded by these children's lack of access to quality preschool education.

That the very educational programs (and substantial federal investment) put forth to improve this disparity may actually be strengthening is not only heartbreaking, it's just plain stupid.

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