Lessons from Far and Near: Notes on a Presentation to the Professional Development Advisory Council (PDAC) Annual Meeting for Stakeholders

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Joni has asked me to share some thoughts about the issues and concerns that bring us together today from the perspective gained from my extensive travels. I've thought a lot about how best to approach this assignment. I thought I would call it "Lessons from Afar." But I gradually changed it to "Lessons from Far and Near"!

It has been my privilege to work with our colleagues in so many countries, and in some of them, many times over. A few weeks ago after lecturing in Malaysia, I completed a three-city lecture tour in Indonesia—the 54th country in which I've lectured. (And we think we've got problems—fourth largest populated country in the world—235 million—a complex long history of tribal warfare, and so forth.) It seems to me that we learn much from travel—not only because of what we see, but because of what it is that what we see makes us think about. Or perhaps it is that travel in itself makes us think. I want to share some hunches and hypotheses that have occurred to me in the course of these international experiences in the short time available today.

Similarities across Countries

I always warn listeners in other countries that my main ideas and understandings of our field are grounded in my North American experience, especially the United States, and that I don't know enough about their contexts and traditions, etc. Yes, there are big differences across countries (some I'll touch on later), *nevertheless,* I am always amazed at the similarities.

One hypothesis for the similarities is that people who do the same kind of work across countries understand each other better than those who have different roles or jobs—even in the same fields—within a country. Get a group of teachers of 4-year-olds or a group of teacher educators from various countries together with their own *role* mates (and soul mates), and they are likely to understand each other in many significant ways more readily than they will understand those in other groups or roles—even from within their own countries. In other words, our roles may be more powerful determinants of our ideas, ideals, ideologies, concerns, and beliefs, etc., than are the larger political, social, and cultural contexts in which we work. But that's just a hypothesis.

Other similarities across countries—at least in the field of early childhood education—are the similarly low status, low pay, and poor or insufficient training that are common to most of them, though not to all.

Best Practice

I am often asked where I see the best practices in our field. Generally, there is widespread agreement—internationally—that the best practices can be seen in Scandinavian countries. The

elements are complex and currently in the processes of change, particularly with regard to starting school earlier (age 6 instead of 7), but their main positive traditions follow:

- Parental leave avoids infant care in institutions and also avoids having to build and maintain them.
- There is strong emphasis on home-like quality of environments in their preschools.
- There is a very strong emphasis on outdoor experiences and activities. (Similarly in New Zealand—I recently made my sixth visit to New Zealand, where outdoor activity is also emphasized. You probably know also that they have very strong concern for the indigenous culture of the Maori. I'll come back to that if there is time.)
- Mixed-age grouping is very common (and in my view should be) through elementary school years in most cases.
- They take seriously the training of personnel.

But the Scandinavian countries, and New Zealand, have very small populations. The Scandinavian total population is slightly more than the population of Illinois, and New Zealand has approximately 4.5 million people (and 50 million sheep!).

Another outstanding example of good quality, of course, is Reggio Emilia in northern Italy:

- In Reggio Emilia the support of their preprimary institutions is the top category in the city budget.
- Until now, the teaching staff had only a high school education—but that is changing now because Italy is in the European Union, and it must conform to the European requirements.
- The seriousness of inservice training is exceptional—once per week (except for the once-per-month gathering of all the city's preprimary staff). Staff members meet for about two-and-a-half hours and *talk about their work, show each other their work, focus on the nature of children's experiences, and discuss where it might go next.*
- The role of the *pedagogisti* is also important and exceptional. They provide constant support to all staff at the preprimary sites. I hope we can achieve some of the same advantages with our PDA program here in Illinois.

But that level of quality is *not* common in Italy. I have seen ordinary as well as poor programs in other Italian cities, such as parochial preschools that have a long tradition of teaching as indoctrination.

U.S. Influence

There is also considerable transfer of ideas from the United States to other countries. Often when I return to the UK (where I grew up), I feel the Americanization of the old country! They have learned some good things from us:

- Concern for increasing diversity, multicultural sensitivity and ethnic sensitivity, concern with second-language learning of immigrants, etc. I think the United States was ahead on those issues.

- These areas are also gradually becoming a big concern in Scandinavia, The Netherlands, France, Germany, and Italy.
- In Reggio Emilia—a city that is determined to make the increasing diversity work—they have appointed what they all Cultural Mediators. These are individuals from various countries (e.g., Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria) who know enough Italian to help the staff understand their communities' needs and can help their communities understand what their hosts are trying to achieve.

Unfortunately, other countries have, at least in the UK, adopted from us some not-so-good things, namely the "push down" phenomenon—that is, doing earlier and earlier to children what probably shouldn't be done later either!

- The UK Parliament recently introduced legislation to start 4-year-olds on reading—much earlier than had been the custom—in order to get them ready for school. English is a difficult language to learn to read. It is one reason *not* to start early.

- In the UK, and here, there is also increasing pressure for what is called the *alignment of the curriculum*—supposedly to smooth the transition from preschool to school. This concept of alignment is one of the main ideas in the new edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Copple & Bredekamp, 2008).
- But they do not worry about alignment in Reggio. The last thing they would want to do is to start the traditional formal didactic approach to teaching earlier!

A Different Paradigm

I want to suggest a different paradigm as a way of thinking about the kinds of experiences we should provide to young children. I would suggest that instead of doing earlier what we probably shouldn't do later, we should focus on building a good foundation upon which the rest of a child's education can be built.

I find a useful analogy for approaching the many challenges of education in the early years is to think of it as setting a good foundation for the future in much the same way that architects and structural engineers approach the work of building a structure. At the outset, *three* basic principles must be applied to the design of the building's foundation. (There is a fourth one that I will add as well.)

The first principle is to *base the design on comprehensive information concerning the nature of the soil the structure will be resting upon*. The structure would have to be designed differently depending on whether the soil is rocky or muddy or sandy, etc. In a similar way, a teacher gathers as much information as possible about the kinds of experiences that each child in the group has or has not already had, and what each child has or has not already learned. A teacher uses this information in the processes of deciding which experiences to provide them. In order to do this effectively, the teacher gives time and effort not only to *knowing about* each child, but also to *knowing* each child.

The second principle of foundation design is to focus on the *characteristics of the structure* that is to be placed on top of the foundation. Thus information about the building's attributes such its height, weight, area, horizontal expanse, and so forth, are carefully studied and taken into account during the design processes. Similarly, curriculum developers and teachers plan experiences for young children in terms of their broad aims and goals as well as their more immediate specific objectives.

A good foundation in the early years takes into account all domains of development: social, emotional (both of which must be off to a good start by about the age of 6), cognitive (I prefer the term intellectual, but I'll come back to that shortly), physical, aesthetic, cultural, and other fundamental aspects of growth, development, and learning. It is not simply limited to learning a few letters of the alphabet and to the mastery of a few discrete skills practiced on worksheets or practicing the calendar—which is a terrible waste of time! (It is important to distinguish between *knowing* and *understanding*!) Rather, the experiences we plan for the children are based on the part that these experiences can be expected to play as a foundation for future learning, which should be based on the best available knowledge of the relationships between early experience and mature functioning.

Here I want to emphasize the distinction between academic goals and intellectual (*versus cognitive*) goals:

Academic goals are those concerned with acquiring small discrete bits of disembedded information, usually related to preliteracy skills, and practiced in drills, worksheets, and other kinds of exercises designed to prepare them for later literacy and numeracy learning. The items learned and practiced can be right or wrong; they have correct and incorrect answers. They rely heavily on memorization, the application of formulae versus understanding, and consist largely of giving the teacher the correct answers that the children usually know she/he is waiting for. Although one of the traditional meanings of the term *academic* is "of little practical value," these bits of information are essential components of reading and other academic competencies. The issue here is not *whether* academic skills matter; rather it is *when* they matter.

On the other hand, *intellectual goals,* and their related activities, address the life of the mind in its fullest sense, including aesthetic and moral sensibilities. The formal definition of the concept of *intellectual* emphasizes reasoning, hypothesizing, predicting, the development and analysis of ideas, and the quest for understanding.

An appropriate curriculum for young children should focus on supporting their in-born intellectual dispositions, for example, the disposition to make the best sense they can of their own experience and environment. An appropriate curriculum in the early years is one that encourages and motivates children to seek mastery of basic academic skills, for example, beginning writing skills, *in the service of their intellectual pursuits.* The children should be able to sense that writing and reading have uses and can serve a purpose—purposefulness sensed by the learner is an important consideration.

There are two points to emphasize in connection with the importance of intellectual goals. The first is that it is easy to mistakenly assume that because some young children have not been

exposed to the knowledge and skills associated with "school readiness" (e.g., writing their name, being read to) they lack the basic intellectual dispositions to make sense of experience, to analyze, to hypothesize, to predict, etc., that their peers of more affluent backgrounds may have. Children of very-low-income families may not have been read to or held a pencil at home, but they too have lively minds. Indeed, the intellectual challenges many children face in coping with precarious environments are likely to be substantial and often complex.

Second, 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 trivial if not banal activities frequently offered in child care, preschool, and kindergarten programs. When young children engage in what I call projects, their minds are fully engaged. During projects, children conduct investigations of significant phenomena and events around them. They develop the research questions through which they themselves find out how things work, what things are made of, what people around them do that contributes to their well-being, and so on and so forth. (See reports of projects in each issue of *Early Childhood Research & Practice*—http://ecrp.illinois.edu.) Furthermore, the usefulness and importance of being able to read, write, measure, and count becomes self-evident in the course of good project work (Katz & Chard, 2000; Helm & Katz, 2001). An essential feature of good project work is that it provides children with contexts in which they are motivated to ask for help in the use of basic skills (e.g., writing captions for drawings or bar graphs) as they work with purpose on representing the findings of their investigations.

The *third basic principle of designing foundations is to anticipate all of the possible stresses* to which the structure is likely to be subjected in the future. These might include hurricane-force winds, tornadoes, heavy loads of snow, floods, earthquakes, and the like. In a similar way, curriculum developers and teachers strive to lay foundations that can support long-term goals, such as the fundamental goal of all education—to develop and support a robust *disposition to go on learning* for a lifetime, rather than just to focus on short-term gains on annual tests that may be obtained at the expense of the disposition to go on learning.

Finally, a fourth principle is also what engineers builders know, namely that *if you do it wrong, it is very difficult and expensive to repair.* In other words, educators should also keep in mind what builders know only too well: If the foundations of a building are not properly laid at the outset, it can be difficult and expensive to repair later on; indeed, some kinds of early errors may even be the cause of significant injuries in the future. Designers of buildings have extensive data from their experience and careful laboratory research on the effects of foundations on stress resistance. However, one of the most intractable issues in the field of early education and child development is that the relationships between early experience and long-term stress management are difficult to pin down.

I have already suggested some of the kinds of experiences children should have in the early years, but, building a good foundation requires well-trained, well-qualified, and strongly supported staff. And as we all know, that requires at least decent pay and benefits and continuous inservice support. That is why our work here and what has been accomplished so far by the Gateways to Opportunity project are so important.

The Terms We Use!

It goes without saying that the terms we use in our daily discourse constantly change. Fifty years ago my eldest son started what we all referred to then as "nursery school." Today this term is rarely used—at least in the United States. I am not sure of the significance of the change from nursery school to preschool and PreK, as we say here in Illinois. Perhaps it reflects the contemporary view that the main mission of early education is preparation for school, that is, "school readiness," as I have already suggested.

But that particular shift in terms is not as disconcerting to me as the current tendency to refer to child care as an "industry." It seems to me that the term "industry" implies some kind of factory in which raw materials are placed on an assembly line, treated with a series of processes, and "out come" identical shoes or bottles or whatever. Indeed, the frequent use of the term "outcomes" when referring to the effects that we want to have on the children and the families we serve is also consistent with an industrial analogy.

It seems more appropriate to talk about our programs as "services" and to describe our goals in terms of the "effects" that we hope to have upon those we serve. The latter would imply that we early childhood educators are public servants, in the best sense of that term!

A related concern is the increasing use of the term "workforce" when referring to those who staff our preschool and child care programs. Kagan, Kauerz, and Tarrant (2008) have just published an excellent and thoughtful examination of the many complex issues confronting the field of early care and education. But the book's title is *The Early Care and Education Teaching Workforce at the Fulcrum: An Agenda for Reform.* Indeed, a Web site named "Early Childhood Workforce" (http://www.earlychildhoodworkforce.com) offers rich and useful information for all concerned with our field. NAEYC also offers a Web site that provides "Critical Facts about the Early Childhood Workforce" (http://www.naeyc.org/ece/critical/facts3.asp)

Nevertheless, there is something about the use of the term "force" here that I find somewhat off-putting as well as inappropriate (perhaps a long-lasting effect of growing up in wartime England and the constant chatter in those terrible times about the enemy "forces"!). But how can we talk about those whose work involves the care and education of young children as associated with "force"?

I am not sure what to recommend as a solution to this problem. It is somewhat awkward to refer to family day care providers and infant care staff as "teachers" in the customary sense of that term. But, again, "workforce" seems more fitting for an industrial rather than a nurturing role.

Another term that seems to have crept into our daily chatter is that of "delivery." Frequent references are made to "delivering" education, or curricula, or instruction to the wide range of educational settings. In a framework for early childhood professional development, NAEYC includes in its list of important elements "active involvement of all players—providers, practitioners, parents, and community leaders from both public and private sectors—in all aspects of programplanning and delivery" (http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/psconf98.asp). But my point here is that one can "deliver" the mail or the milk—at least in the old days! But

educational experiences have to be *provided* and cannot simply be delivered; they have to be made accessible in quite different ways from the mail or even email!

Let us hope then, that we come together to *provide* a good quality of *service* as caregivers and as teachers of young children and continue to strive to become the best *public servants* we can be.

In Conclusion

Let's not waste time and energy worrying about what's wrong or who is to blame—what I call "the blame drain." Let each and all of us do what is in our hands to do as well and as wholeheartedly as we know how. And the rest will follow. And even if it doesn't, we will be doing what is right.

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