

Back to the True Basics



by
Judith M. Finkelstein
and
Linda M. Fitzgerald

It's easy to convince people that children need to learn the alphabet and numbers. How do we help people to realize that what matters is how a person's inner life finally puts together the alphabet and numbers of his outer life? What really matters is whether he uses the alphabet for the declaration of war or for the description of a sunrise, and his numbers for the final count at Buchenwald or for the specifics of a brand new bride.

– Fred Rogers

To those of us in early childhood education, defined as programs for children from birth through grade three or eight years old, public television's Mr. Rogers is a well known and highly respected person. We teachers as well as young children listen when he speaks because he helps us to put things into perspective. He is concerned not only with children, but with the world in which children live and will live. In the above quote, he points out what can happen when the "back to the basics" movement permeated the early childhood curriculum so that all that is thought to be important is learning to read and write and "do" numbers in isolated skills oriented situations in order that high test scores can be achieved. Unfortunately this

does happen in many schools where teachers and curriculum directors are unaware of the capability of young children for deep learning. When teachers are so busy delivering skills lessons, they don't stop and listen to what the children are telling them they really want and need to know. Although often considered to be ideal teaching environments, classrooms where "quiet" prevails are danger zones for thinking and exploring ideas. They can be sterile places where teachers teach without taking into consideration what children want and need to learn. Of course everyone needs to learn to read and write and compute, but these skills can be taught in a more lasting and meaningful way if they are placed in the context of topics relevant to the child's life, and children are encouraged to participate in discovering and building their own knowledge base while using them.

Where do we get such topics? In a series of interviews done in conjunction with a study of curriculum development, some teachers reported that they got teaching topics from the children, by listening to what they were talking about and observing what they brought to school to share. One child brought a bird's nest that had fallen from a tree and also shared several books she and her mother had gotten from the library about birds. Several more children expressed interest in this topic and soon the whole class was involved in the study of various aspects of bird life in the world.

In 1990, The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published a document titled Social Studies Curriculum Planning Resources. In this volume are found the NCSS Essentials of Social Studies which state that, "Effective social studies programs help prepare young people who can identify, understand, and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world" (p.9). From their study of birds, these first graders learned about the interdependence of all earth's creatures, how people can preserve endangered species, as well as how some birds can become pets. In that same year, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published their Standard for Quality Programs for Young Children: Early Childhood Education and the Elementary School Principal, which supported this problem solving approach to schooling for young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) had in 1987 published their widely distributed docu-

ment, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8, which also advocated this approach to schooling for the young child.

The social studies curriculum can provide early childhood teachers the avenue for implementation of an approach to teaching and learning that will serve young children well in the early learning classroom as well as throughout their lives. Specific guidance for doing so can be found in the Essentials of the Social Studies statement. Five areas thought to be crucial for guiding programming are identified. They are: knowledge, democratic beliefs, thinking skills, civic action and participation skills. Each of these will be discussed and examples of their implementation suggested.

KNOWLEDGE

Young children are hungry for knowledge. All the children mentioned above became interested in birds. The topic was "meaty" enough for all to find intellectual satisfaction. This is but one topic that came from the children. Other teachers in the curriculum development study, keeping the population of students and families they were working with in mind, chose the topics for investigation. They first selected an overriding theme which they intended to study all year such as community, environment, change, friendship, cultures, wellness, patterns, comparisons and water. From these themes, various units emerged. For example, under the change theme units studies were harvest, dinosaurs, Native Americans, seasons, fire, the human body and pioneers. Only one or possibly two themes were explored during a school year so children could study the topics in depth and make connections that were meaningful to them. Without explicitly using them to guide their selections, the teachers chose themes and units that fit into the categories outlined in the Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies published by NCSS in 1994.

DEMOCRATIC BELIEFS

"Jeremy, you are breaking rule 3. PLEASE remember that we decided we were going to walk in this room." This was not a teacher admonishing Jeremy to remember the rules, but another

four year old who had been involved in developing a set of room rules (as had Jeremy) when the school year began. Young children possess a strong sense of justice and are most willing to accept responsibility for their actions if they have had a part in establishing what the rules are and what the consequences for breaking the rules will be. Equality is important to them and their egocentrism diminishes when they are given opportunities to solve problems and share ideas about how things can be made more fair. They readily accept diversity and are more than happy to help a child in a wheel chair or whose vision is impaired, if they know why, what happened and what needs to be done. They also have a right to privacy when it is a felt need. A child doesn't always have to share the blocks if she is deeply involved in some special project that will take them all on that particular day and if she can verbalize this need. Often children's behavior will reflect a teacher's infringement on their freedom to express themselves in ways they choose, which can be perfectly justified when examined in light of their developmental capabilities, experiences, and viewpoint.

THINKING SKILLS

Within the thinking skills program essential lies the justification and necessity for an early childhood curriculum based on the topics outlined in the curriculum standards. If we want children to learn to love learning, we need to allow them to take an active role in their learning. They need to search and gather data about topics they are interested in. They can take responsibility for classifying their information perhaps in making a mural. Through open discussions and collaborative reading and exploring of books they can compare ideas with others. They can plan and discuss how something should be constructed while engaged in a project such as building a school bus out of boxes in the classroom. And at the end of a unit they can work together on a program for their parents that will inform them of all that was learned during the study.

PARTICIPATION SKILLS

Young children come to school eager and willing to participate. They respond to voting as a fair way to make decision and with direction can learn the importance of only voting once. In fact,

having been given this privilege, they come to see the democratic process as the way things should be done and if they are not allowed to have some say in procedures and decisions, they will resist a teacher imposed agenda by asking questions and stating their desires. When working on a project, young children learn to listen to each other's ideas and negotiate for what they think is going to make the greatest contribution to the final product, not just what they want it to be like. During the ensuing years of schooling, children need to be provided many experiences where their ideas will be valued and listened to so this desire to be a contributing member of the group will not be lost.

CIVIC ACTION

No one is too young for "civic action". Children can be given a voice in the way in which a classroom is physically planned by designing the bulletin boards and arranging the furniture. Offered a chance to explore an area of a topic under discussion that no one else has thought of they can bring back information to the group. Opportunities to express why they chose to solve a problem in a certain way can be part of teaching them how to use "peace chairs" to negotiate with peers. In all these ways a classroom community can be built where children will be so excited about learning they will **NEED** to read about a topic, and **WANT** to write down what they know so they can share, and **HAVE** to figure out how many cookies will be needed for the party so everyone can have two. Then the real basics of life will be introduced and children will learn how to make this world a better place where all people can work together and continue learning throughout their lives.

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Biography

Dr. Judith M. Finkelstein is a Professor of Education at the University of Northern Iowa where she has taught for the last 30 years. She developed the Nursery Kindergarten program at Price Laboratory School and has taught all the primary grades. She also has taught Social Studies Methods, and currently teaches courses in the Early Childhood Program on both the undergraduate and graduate level. She is a Fellow in the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education where she is doing research on how teachers develop curriculum.

Dr. Linda May Fitzgerald is a Professor of Education at the University of Northern Iowa. She is also a Research Fellow in the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education where she is engaged in research on inclusion of children with special needs into classrooms inspired by the Reggio Emilia model of early childhood education. Informed by social science systems theory dealing with the ecology of child development and the cross-cultural and multi-cultural contexts of early childhood care and education, she works with pre-service and in-service teachers on a variety of topics related to diversity.