

Teaching the Young Child: Goals for Illinois

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On this occasion of the first annual state conference of the Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children, I would like to talk in a general way about the goals and purposes of the organization, and to sketch out an approach toward its future role in the lives of young children in our state.

One of our major objectives in forming the Illinois Association for the Education of Young children has been to provide a channel for information, for support, ideas, knowledge and inspiration for all of us in the State of Illinois whose lives involve us with young children. Another goal is to maintain a constant eye on the standards, the quality and the availability of the services offered to young children in our state. This also includes identifying some of the gaps in services needed by young children. We also want to help to identify some of the major problems that impinge upon the lives of young children, and develop positions as a State group on the proper priorities in our state in terms of the needs of young children. Another goal is to help develop a meaningful code of ethics by which to strengthen, to support, and encourage our own resolution to work for the benefit of the young. Another goal is to foster very strong working relationships with all those other groups in the state who share our own concerns for young children.

There are several active groups in our state such as the Child Care Association, EKNE, ACEI, and probably others we are not aware of. It is important to keep in mind that we, as groups, have much more in common

than we have apart, and we will serve our children best by developing the kind of strength that comes from coordinating and consolidating our efforts. We also want very clearly to focus our attention on activities in our own State as our area of responsibility, as our sphere of influence and our particular domain. In this connection I want to suggest that there may be some talented and visionary public servants in Springfield who want to introduce and support good legislation for young children. The chances are that they usually hear from people who want to resist progressive legislation! Perhaps we can be useful by supporting the efforts of such forward-moving legislators by asking them how we can help them. So this broad outline gives you a general picture of the goals guiding the plans for the Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children.

In terms of our future role, I want to share with you some hunches I have about strategies. It seems to me that the problems we have in Illinois in terms of early childhood education, day care and the preparation of teachers to work with young children are problems one would find elsewhere in our country. In fact, if I may digress, it seems to me that there really are no problems in education that are not also problems in other sectors of our society. Conflicts over goals, changing values, unimaginativeness, and a shortage of competent people, poor planning, competitiveness, narrow-mindedness and mistrust, mark all aspects of our social life.

One problem, it seems to me, is that our efforts on behalf of young children are so diffused and so scattered that we have seen virtually no impact. An enormous amount of money has already been spent in the last half a dozen years on young children; but it has been spread so thin, and has attempted to accomplish so many different goals, that on the whole the

assessment of the effect of these programs and developments is discouraging. In fact, one of the suggestions I heard during a recent meeting in Washington was that Sesame Street has been so successful and so relatively simple that perhaps the solution to the early childhood problem might be to add another half-hour of programming rather than more classes and projects! Perhaps that is the logical reaction of those who want to see instant success and good test results in a hurry. But it may be fair to say that early childhood education has not yet really been tried.

The achievement of high quality programs for young children is extremely difficult. It is not just the provision of a building and a mixture of adults and children, equipment and materials. High quality programs involve many, many other things and we do not yet even know all of the dimensions of those things. Sometimes I get the impression, as I think about the various problems that nursery schools and day care centers have, that they are in some ways similar to homes for the elderly. In both cases we are trying to provide services to clients who are relatively helpless; clients who cannot really get up and say, "I don't like what you are doing. I'm going down the street to Mrs. So and So's nursery school or old age home." They are the most vulnerable people in the world. I do not know who speaks for the aged; but I do hope we speak for the young who really cannot speak for themselves.

Most of us readily agree that it is difficult to provide high quality services to young children. I think that among the things required for high quality are first of all, a very intensive kind of interacting and relating to children. (By the way, that's something that television cannot do). But by intensive interacting I mean face-to-face contact with a child; eye-to-eye

contact with a child. Do you know how much instruction takes place from behind a child? So often we see adults in classes with young children leaning over them from behind them pointing out things that they should be doing or giving them things, even serving food to them this way.

One hypothesis I have concerning the effects of preschool programs on children is that those for whom programs are ineffective are the children in the group who have the least contact with the adults. Most of research on the effects of programs is reported in terms of averages or means for whole groups of children. But what do we know about the individual children who "bring the scores down"? It is conceivable that those children who are most verbal, perhaps most intelligent, and easiest to get along with are getting more than their share of the teacher's time, of the teacher's intensive interacting. But the point is that we cannot generate those kinds of intensive interactions with children when we are busy with other things.

It seems to be increasingly true that teachers and directors are asked to do more and more things that keep them away from interacting with children. There are all those forms to be filled out, bus schedules to be organized, and so on. They are important things, by the way, and have to be done by someone. There are other things also that drain our energy away from interacting directly and intensively with young children, such as having to resolve staff squabbles, and the conflicts that are so common among adults who work together. Not the least of the conflicts occur between the teachers and the people they report to. These things take an enormous amount of energy. They are not unique to early childhood education programs. They can be seen everywhere in all our social groups, in universities, in industries and certainly in government agencies.

Another aspect of high quality programs seems to me to be the difference between knowing about a child and knowing a child. In order to mean anything to a child in terms of his growth and development we need to know him or her; but in fact we are much better at knowing about children. You can know about children by collecting data on them. We know their ages, the number of immunizations, their weight and a good deal about their families. Teachers often tell me all sorts of facts about a child: about the fact his father is gone, or perhaps that her mother is working, and so forth. But they often do not know the child herself. Knowing the child once again requires relating directly, in eye-to-eye fashion with the child each day. And you cannot really develop good quality relationships and services for young children unless you do know them in this direct way.

Another aspect of high quality programs, it seems to me, is that it requires of us a good deal of reflection on our day-to-day activities. We are all aware of how important it is to do planning for our programs. But I am not sure that that alone is as important as reflecting on what we have just done. Reflection takes time and that again cannot be done when our energy is drained by all the other things increasingly required of people working in programs with young children.

The point I want to emphasize here is that it seems to me that we have a chance to succeed and to realize our goals if we hold ourselves responsible for our own mistakes; if we ally ourselves with others who are responsible for the larger picture in other states, and if we join forces with them; when we do all we can to support their efforts. But ultimately it is the local effort that really counts. It is the quality of day-to-day encounters of individual adults with individual as well as groups of children that is really

our responsibility. Which brings me to some important aspects of the role of our organization.

It seems to me that if you want to get an organization going, your best chance is to organize for opposition. It seems to be a general principle that it is easier to organize people for opposition than for anything else. It is far more difficult to organize a group for proposition, and I see this statewide group as that sort of a group, as organized in order to propose. That is, in order to propose, in addition to ourselves, to propose to those whose actions impinge upon us and the children. Generally, it is quite easy to recognize what we ought to propose to other people. We have been through that exercise already this morning in our earlier discussions, and we have some strong notions about what to propose to our State officials. That is very easy. It is easy to give advice to others.

But I now want to take advantage of this opportunity to emphasize and urge all of us to consider two somewhat alternative approaches to our role in the State. One, I think, is to propose to those around us that they do what we think is right; that we get in touch with the decision-makers of various kinds and we tell them what we stand for, we tell them what is right, what is wrong, and what they ought to do. In effect, that we constitute a pressure group. That is one approach. Perhaps part of our work will be of that kind.

But there is another approach that I would like to suggest It has been coming to me slowly for the past several years, and permit me to share it with you. This approach is to be the finest possible example of what we believe in, and to perform our individual responsibilities, our individual roles in working with young children day-to-day, in the very best possible way. In

other words, in addition to constituting ourselves as a pressure group, to become also an impressive group. That is to say, that the quality of the experiences we provide for children and the benefits that high quality produces is in and of itself, impressive enough to cause us to listened to when we engage in the pressure group work of the association.

What I think I have been watching lately is the huge numbers of conflicting and increasing pressures being applied to all people in the leadership roles at local, state, and national levels. These leaders include school principals, school board members, legislators, governors, and so forth. They are all being pressured and increasingly so, and in conflicting directions. And after all, that makes sense. But I am not sure there is any slack in the system to take up these excessive pressures. I do not want to be alarmist, but I often wonder if this system could not easily burst, which- by the way- will not help our children. At this point in my understanding of the way societies work, our children have nothing to gain from the disorganization of the system.

So that I am suggesting that we clarify for and to ourselves who and how we are to use our energy. That we use it directly in the service of children in the day-to-day living that we do with the children. By all means let us identify our allies who are in all sorts of positions and places; let's join forces with them and encourage them and support them while we continue to do our "things." Our things, it seem to me, are to assure each child in this State the fullest, deepest, and best quality of experience during those hours and days that we spend with him. The Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children was organized with that in mind. Let us know how we can help you do that.

