

## Considerações Prévias

# Distinctions Between Academic and Intellectual Goals for Young Children

Lilian G. Katz, PhD

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

**Resumo:** Lilian Katz refere-se à crescente tendência nos Estados Unidos de introduzir objetivos de caráter “acadêmico” nos programas destinados a crianças pequenas, em alternativa a programas centrados simplesmente no jogo espontâneo. Katz propõe uma terceira alternativa que desenvolva as competências de caráter intelectual nas crianças, de modo a estimular o desenvolvimento das suas mentes e as suas sensibilidades morais e estéticas. Katz propõe a introdução do trabalho de projeto com crianças desde os primeiros anos.

**Abstract:** Lilian Katz refers to the present tendency in the United States of introducing “academic” goals in programs for young children, as an alternative to programs centered on spontaneous play. Katz suggests a third alternative which is to develop intellectual competencies in young children with a special emphasis on the development of their minds, including their moral and aesthetic sensibilities. Katz suggests that project work may help children from their early years to develop these kinds of competencies.

**Résumé:** Lilian Katz se réfère à la tendance croissante aux Etats-Unis d'introduire des objectifs de caractère « académique » dans les programmes destinés aux jeunes enfants, en alternative à des programmes centrés simplement sur le jeu spontané. Katz propose une troisième alternative qui développe chez les enfants, les compétences de caractère intellectuel de façon à stimuler le développement de leurs pensées et de leurs sensibilités morales et esthétiques. Katz propose l'introduction du travail de projet avec des enfants dès les premières années.



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Contacto: Lilian G. Katz, PhD, Co-Director, Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting, Editor, Early Childhood Education and Parenting Professor Emerita, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

A strong trend has emerged in the US and several other countries to emphasize supporting young children's readiness for school by introducing academic instructional activities during the preschool years. I want to suggest that the issue involved is not a simple matter of making a choice between emphasizing academic instruction versus traditional spontaneous play activities. The main argument here is that much of the discussion and debate about appropriate preschool curricula is based on a misleading dichotomy – between offering young children formal academic instruction versus child-centered play, cutting and pasting. I suggest that a more useful way of looking at the choices involved in preschool and kindergarten curriculum approaches is to examine the distinctions between academic and intellectual goals and activities, especially during the early years.

Academic goals are those concerned with acquiring small discrete bits of disembedded information, usually related to pre-literacy skills that must be practiced in drills, and worksheets, and other kinds of exercises designed to prepare them for later literacy and numeracy learning. In an academic curriculum the items learned and practiced require correct answers, rely heavily on memorization, on the application of formulae versus understanding. The activities consist largely of giving the teacher the correct answers that the children know she awaits. 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 competences. The question here is not whether academic skills matter; rather it is: When does their acquisition matter?

Intellectual goals and their related activities, on the other hand, address the life of the mind in its fullest sense, including a range of aesthetic and moral sensibilities. The formal definition of the concept of intellectual emphasizes reasoning, hypothesizing, predicting, the quest for understanding and conjecturing as well as the development and analysis of ideas. An appropriate curriculum for young children focuses 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, e.g. beginning writing skills, in the service of their intellectual pursuits. The children should be able to sense the purposefulness of their efforts to master a variety of academic skills and to appreciate their usefulness and their various purposes.

There are at least 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' they lack the basic intellectual dispositions such as to make sense of experience, to analyze, hypothesize, predict, as do their peers of more affluent backgrounds. Children of very low-income families may not have been read to or held a pencil at home. But I suggest that it is a good idea to assume that 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. In other words, in our early years practices we are not caught between formal academic lessons or cutting and pasting "refrigerator art" activities. I visited a school district in one of our Western states not long ago in which the kindergartens had adopted as a theme for the year "Teddy Bears." In the classroom visited, each of the children was expected to "show and tell" about his or her own teddy bears, to count a collection, to measure their lengths and obtain their weights and make up stories with them as main

characters. While such activities are probably not harmful and may even be fun for the children, they are not intellectually engaging or stimulating.

By contrast, when young children engage in projects in which they conduct investigations of significant objects and events around them for which they have developed the research questions, their intellectual capacities are provoked and used. In the course of these investigations that are a part of their curriculum, the children's minds are fully engaged as they themselves find out how things work, what things are made of, where they come from, who does what, what tools they use, and in general what people around them do to contribute to their well-being, as can be seen in many reports of project work in the early years (see reports of projects in each issue of *Early Childhood Research and Practice* [HYPERLINK "http://ecrp.uiuc.edu" http://ecrp.uiuc.edu](http://ecrp.uiuc.edu)). Furthermore, the usefulness and importance of being able to read, write, measure and count, make charts, etc. become self-evident in the course of good project work (Katz & Chard, 2000; Helm & Katz, 2001).

Another factor to consider here is that frequently academic instruction puts children in a passive and receptive role, whereas during the investigations conducted in project work the children are active, assertive role; they take initiative and responsibility in determining the research questions and how to collect the relevant data and represent and document it (See Katz and Chard, 2000).

The distinction between short-term versus long-term effects of early academic instruction

While many academic skills are both useful and essential, the question to raise here again, is a developmental one, namely: At what point in the course of development are academic exercises most appropriate? We all agree with the proposition that learning to read -- and in the process, acquiring the disposition to be readers -- is a major educational goal. But just when this process should be started and with what intensity raises many questions among those concerned with our youngest children.

No doubt one of the factors accounting for increasing interest in formulating clear outcomes and standards for preschool programs may be the recent and growing recognition of the role of stimulation in early brain development. However, Blair's analysis of neurological research does not imply that formal academic instruction is the way to optimize early brain development (Blair, 2002). On the contrary, Blair proposes a neurobiological model of school readiness based on his analysis of recent neurological data, the implications of which are that preschool programs are best when they focus on social, emotional and intellectual goals rather than narrow academics. On the basis of his model, an intellectually - rather than academically focused approach is most likely to yield desirable "school readiness" as well as longer term benefits. Blair's analysis emphasizes the positive role of early experiences that provoke self-regulation, initiative, and what he calls synchronous interaction in which the child is interactive with others rather than a mere passive recipient of isolated bits of information.

Furthermore, the common sense notion that "earlier is better" is not supported by longitudinal studies of the long-term effects of different kinds of preschool curriculum models. On the contrary, a number of longitudinal follow-up studies indicate that while formal instruction produces good test results in the short term, preschool curriculum and teaching methods emphasizing children's interactive roles and providing frequent opportunities for them to exercise initiative, while not so impressive in the short term, yield better school participation and achievement in the long term (Golbeck, 2001, Marcon, 2002).

There are two points to emphasize about the implications of these data concerning the effects of different preschool curricula. One is that only in the long term are the disadvantages of early formal instruction apparent. The disadvantages are not usually observable in the short term. To some unknowable extent the apparent short-term benefits of formal instruction are related to the extent to which the curriculum prepares the children to respond to the items on the tests! Preschoolers who do not have formal academic instruction related to items on the tests are less likely to perform well on them.

The second point is that early formal instruction, in the long term, is apparently more damaging to boys than to girls. Explanations for this finding are not entirely clear. One interpretation of this finding may be that in most cultures, girls generally learn to accept a passive role (the essence of academic instruction) early and accept it more easily than do boys. On the whole, boys appear to prefer active and interactive experiences, and in most cultures are expected to be more visibly assertive than girls. Another possible explanation is the well-known fact that girls mature neurologically slightly earlier than boys, but that they catch up with each other around the age of eight years.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, these sets of distinctions suggest that early introduction of formal academic instruction may not be in the best interests of many of our children, and in fact, may be damaging in the long term. However, early childhood curriculum and teaching methods are best when they address children's lively minds so that they have frequent opportunities to be fully intellectually engaged as well as to engage in spontaneous play, and not just cutting and pasting and producing "refrigerator art."