

# SAVING URBAN CHILDREN: REVISITING THE MISSION OF URBAN EDUCATION IN 2017

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## Introduction

Many thanks to the journal for inviting my abbreviated Commentary on the past and future status of urban education. As the inaugural Constance E. Clayton Professor, I published the first three Clayton lectures by Professors James P. Comer, Edgar G. Epps, and Barbara Bowman in Vol. 1 (1) of this journal in spring 2002. Later, in spring 2005 I published lectures by Professor Linda Darling-Hammond and myself in Vol. 2 (3) before my retirement in 2011. The lectures, together with five others, were subsequently published in *Messages for Educational Leadership: The Constance E. Clayton Lectures 1998-2007* (Peter Lang, 2012). My edited volume has 16 chapters, including the text of an interview I conducted with Dr. Clayton on March 22, 2011.

After discussion of the concept of urban education, the major future challenge I address in this brief Commentary is the absence of a long-term and developmental perspective in this interdisciplinary field, as contrasted with perspectives held by pre-kindergarten and preschool professionals in early childhood education. It is a challenge that I hope will be addressed in the future by local states that assume responsibility for the education of United States children and youth between ages 5-18.

## Defining Urban Education

For most of my thirteen-year tenure on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania I taught a foundations course in Urban Education to graduate students. I envisioned the course as an opportunity for teachers, researchers, and scholars to reflect upon the *concept* of urban education by review, study, and discussion of what I believed to be the “classics” in this interdisciplinary field, although I also used contemporary readings that addressed similar issues. Consistent themes in the readings included attention to: (1) an accounting of the basis for urban children's school failures and successes; (2) a focus upon the sources of educational inequities, and appropriate forms of their resolution, whether in relation to class, race, ethnicity, or gender; (3) an emphasis on school improvement, even school restructuring, such that educational institutions are modified to address children's personal-social needs, cognitive capacities, and behavioral motivations; (4) an emphasis on the potential contributions of parents, families, even communities to positive and constructive classroom and school change; (5) an allegiance to the value of quality education, public and private, for all of the nation's children; and (6) an expectation that teacher and administrative training/retraining were essential elements to realizing this educational aim. This course explored how ideas were presented and rationalized, beginning in 1948 with Allison Davis' lecture at Harvard, and continuing over subsequent decades, about 60 years, as the concept of urban education emerged and evolved.

Further supporting the concept of urban education, beginning in 1968 and continuing for 35 years, the federal government sponsored an ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, whose self-identified and referenced topical areas covered:

- (1) the education and well-being of urban and minority children and youth, especially African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans;
- (2) special issues facing urban schools;
- (3) language education issues;
- (4) ethnic and gender discrimination and segregation;
- (5) urban and minority social institutions and services as they relate to education;
- (6) multicultural education.

This excellent resource was closed in 2003, and a notice provided at the website (<http://www.eric.ed.gov>):

Notice from The ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education: The ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education closed on December 19, 2003. We thank you for over 35 years of encouragement and support...the resources currently located on this web site will be moved to the website of our host, the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Urban education, by definition, is an interdisciplinary field, characterized by attempts to bring as many perspectives as possible

to the study of research pertaining to urban educational policy, and to the practice of education with children and youth whose lives unfold in densely populated areas-whether city or suburb. In summary, urban education is a context or process that contributes actively to the development and learning of particular children and youth. Its unique mission is to save the children from known psychological and socially destructive pathways toward adult life.

### **Greatest Contemporary Challenge to Urban Education**

The greatest challenge to urban education has been a persistent absence of a cumulative long-term perspective on the learning and development of urban youth. While Project Head Start and its variants have consistently and positively impacted children between ages 0 and 5, there is no bipartisan, nationally endorsed elementary or secondary program equivalent to Project Head Start for impoverished urban children and youth ages 5 to 18. How did we as a nation accomplish such programming for younger children, rather than older children and youth?

First, younger children are singularly more attractive than older children and youth; they are perceived as more dependent, more vulnerable, and more likely to be victims of their environment. Second, curriculum “wars” occurred well before there was an effort to apply the principles of early childhood education to Project Head Start as a preschool program for impoverished youth. For example, the early battle over child-centered versus instruction-centered preschool education is discussed later in this commentary. Third, teachers are less likely to consider the “whole” child once children mature. With advancing age, it becomes less obvious that there are close ties between cognitive and behavioral styles, on one hand, and social emotional and health factors on the other. Fourth, at any age, poverty matters. Lower-income children and their families are less able to compensate for school failures through outside instruction, special programs, and other extra-curricular educational experiences. Fifth, as costly as Head Start programs have been, educational programs for older children and youth are even more costly. States have yet to appreciate that the best long-term educational cost controls are to be found in quality early educational programs for urban youth. In this concluding section of the Commentary, I have time and space to briefly discuss each of these five points that need addressing if older urban children and youth are to benefit from future public or private education.

### **Early Education for Young Children**

Barbara Beatty (1995), early childhood historian, has argued that the serious evolution of American interest in preschool education began in the late 1870s, immediately following the end of the U.S. Civil War, with the rise of the American kindergarten movement. Public interest in kindergarten was partly stimulated by the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, and similar smaller expositions around the nation. These educational experiences initially focused on moral and spiritual training. However, by 1890 in response to societal changes stimulated by rapid industrialization, economic expansion, and urbanization, the “kindergarten mothers’ education movement” began to focus on mothers from lower income and impoverished backgrounds. These children were concentrated in the rapidly developing cities and were thought most affected by the relative isolation from rural, country life, then considered a more natural and healthy environment. The Great Depression of 1929 stalled this movement that was ultimately resurrected in the post-World War II era of prosperity. By then American women had the vote (1921), and the nation was disposed to help vulnerable children.

After President Lyndon Johnson’s administration created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in December 1964, a Head Start planning committee was formed to design a preschool program for poor children. Head Start was one of several social programs aimed at reducing and eventually eradicating poverty in the USA. Sargent Shriver, OEO director, discovered that nearly half of the nation’s 30 million poor people were children, mostly under age 12. According to Ziegler and Muenchow (1992, pp. 3-4):

Worried about the backlash against the first Community Action Program efforts, Shriver also knew that poor children were far more appealing victims than their parents. No one could accuse preschool children of being lazy or responsible for their own financial miseries. A War on Poverty that would benefit children, regardless of their race or ethnicity, was a war most Americans would want to fight.

No such sentiment has systematically infused the nation about older aged children and youth.

### **Early Childhood Curricula “Wars” and Individual Development**

Beatty (1995) observed that American educators disagreed on the substance of the preschool curriculum, and the disagreement further fragmented the kindergarten movement and restricted consensus for structured programming to only the most needy (e.g., impoverished families, single-parent families, families in which women had to work outside their homes for survival). For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, educator John Dewey, principal at the University of Chicago laboratory schools, published a scathing critique of German-derived “Froebel’s educational principles.” Dewey

completely dissented from the idea of exposing children to human evolution through a highly structured curriculum in favor of reality-centered activities for children. In fact, he objected so much to the dominant trends for kindergarten curricula that he actually refused to use the term kindergarten in his school, preferring instead to reference that grade level as the “Sub-Primary Department” (Dewey, 1900; Scates, 1900).

In summary, costs, intense curriculum debates, and concerns about the intrusion of the state upon the quality of educational experiences young children would have outside the home, slowed the movement for kindergarten, and later prekindergarten, services. Conversely, changing societal contexts that intensified the needs of families, the entry of women as voters, and thus active participants in the American political process continued, and still continue, to push the preschool movements forward. World War II, for example, engaged many women voters as active members in the labor force who desired child care outside the home, preferably with quality educational content.

Urban education today has its ongoing and especially divisive curricular wars (e.g., the role of science in education; teaching to the tests versus teaching for critical thinking).

### **Equity Expectations and Child Individuation in Schools and Classrooms**

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1978) reported in *Worlds Apart: Relationships between Families and Schools* that the apparent close ties between mothers and many teachers of younger children are not sustained when children reach elementary school age. She argued that teachers of older children prefer not to individuate children, to focus on their particular strengths and challenges as mothers (parents) continue to do, but rather, to emphasize treating all children equally and without prejudice relative to their unique strengths and challenges. Although this may be desirable (i.e., treating students fairly and equitably), it does not individuate them, specifically, it does not assume a developmental perspective. This profound source of tension between parents/families and schools, especially urban schools, continues today as a social justice issue in modern elementary and secondary classrooms.

Here is another example that addresses the intersection between early and later childhood development and learning. Henry Rubin and I published the oldest longitudinal case study of Head Start children in 2001. I followed a 1965 summer Head Start sample through high school.

I discovered parents in the 1970s follow-up study had been misled; they saw only their children’s report cards—and assumed teacher grades to be trustworthy evidence of how their children progressed academically. However, the criteria for academic achievement placement in the lone suburban high school classes were based on achievement test scores. Therefore, the relative savvy that lower-income parents developed around Head Start programming did not extend into the post-primary grades. By sixth grade, distinctions between Head Start and non-Head Start children favoring the former group were eliminated. All children were on a downward academic achievement spiral and, by high school their expectations and aspirations had been similarly lowered.

At adolescence, the perceived educational goals among the youth were studied by Rubin. Youth were questioned about the relative contributions of parents and teachers to those expectations and aspirations. Preschool and primary grade teachers were most strongly implicated in the contribution of early school experiences to later educational goal setting during adolescence. Head Start preschool teachers predicted who would succeed and who would fail over the course of the subsequent academic lives of their students. By adolescence, students perceived teachers, the principal agents of their school environments, to exercise greater control than their mothers over their formation of educational aspirations and expectations. However, parents continued to be implicated as role models during the processes of adolescent educational goal setting.

### **Poverty Matters: Acquiring Childhood Resilience in the Face of Poverty Is Costly**

Matthew Desmond, author of *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (2016), writes that he finds both liberal and conservative analyses of poverty to fail insofar as both focus on the marginalized poor, rather than the *relationship* between the rich and the poor:

I wanted to try to write a book about poverty that didn’t focus exclusively on poor people or poor places. Poverty was a relationship, I thought, involving poor and rich people alike. To understand poverty, I needed to understand that relationship. This sent me searching for a process that bound poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle. Eviction was such a process... I moved into Tobin’s trailer park in May 2008...” (*Evicted*, p. 317).

Focusing on individual development and ultimate life outcomes, Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, and Nores (2004)

followed Head Start-eligible children into adulthood and mid-life. They reported the educational focus of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, coupled with home visits to families over a 2-year period during which the preschool child was enrolled, were the essential ingredients required to produce differences between the experiences of their program participants and others enrolled in either the control group or in other preschool variants (e.g., a direct instruction/teacher-centered program, or a traditional, socially supportive nursery school program without a strong educational component). Follow-up data at age 40 indicated that the child program participants, especially males, had significantly less often become burdens to society (e.g., less likely to be unemployed or to have had contact with the criminal justice system).

I believe individual lower-income and poor children cannot be inoculated against the effects of poverty. Rather, with high quality age-appropriate intervention(s) like Head Start the children can be set on a positive trajectory that, if continually reinforced through ages 5 to young adulthood by parents and teachers, will result in positive life outcomes. However, societal changes may have considerable bearing on the essential components of those age-appropriate interventions.

From a developmental perspective, we know that chronic poverty can have cumulative adverse effects on childhood physical growth, cognitive and social emotional development, and academic learning. Obviously, so long as there is urban poverty, there will be a need for expertise in urban education. Similar to the model of the Comer School Development Program (Comer, 1980), the expertise will have to focus on individual elementary children's academic, cognitive, *and* physical, social and emotional needs. That is, regardless of chronological age, from a developmental perspective the focus must be on the *whole* child.

### **Universal Preschool Education—Universal Public and Private Education**

The ongoing struggle for universal preschool education seems to be slowly advancing (*The Atlantic*, "You may be surprised by the states that support pre-kindergarten" April 17, 2014), just as our confidence in urban public education is being undermined and eviscerated. It took many decades for states to concur that, whether or not fiscal resources are currently available, a quality education focused on holistic development during early childhood should be offered to all young children, and especially by age four. We must similarly endorse urban education for children and youth ages 5 to 18, if the nation is to enjoy the benefits of national stability, security, and an intelligent, civically engaged labor force in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. We can do this, even if it takes baby steps (Stipek, Franke, Clements, Farran, & Coburn, 2017)!

#### Author Note

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