

# Uniquely Preschool

*To prepare children for authentic learning, early childhood education must bolster basic cognitive and social-emotional competencies.*

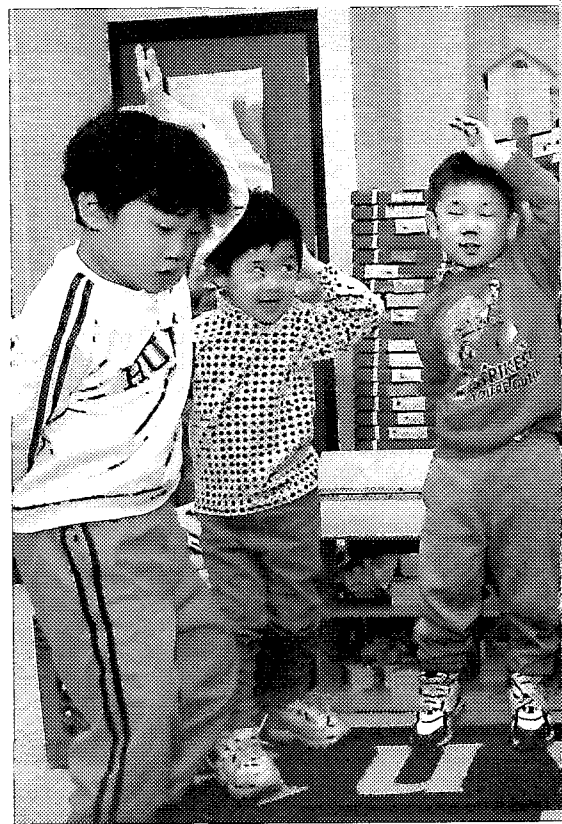
**Elena Bodrova and Deborah J. Leong**

**W**hat should education for young children be about? At a time when zeal for testing has inadvertently led to an overemphasis on acquiring academic content and skills, it is tempting to focus preschool and early elementary teaching on mastering these skills. But early education for the whole child cannot be reduced to teaching facts and skills. As Russian educator Alexander Zaporozhets cautioned,

Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period—that would prematurely turn a toddler into a preschooler and a preschooler into a

first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite—expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely “preschool.” (1978, p. 88)

Although voiced in 1978, this warning against inappropriate acceleration of the curriculum seems appropriate today. Zaporozhets was a colleague and student of Lev Vygotsky and a lifelong advocate for high-quality preschool programs that address the needs of the whole child. In advocating “activities that are uniquely ‘preschool,’” Zaporozhets was referring to Vygotsky’s belief that in the preschool years, children need to acquire a set of fundamental cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional competencies that shape their minds for further learning—not just academic learning, but all learning.



These skills include oral language, deliberate memory, focused attention, and self-regulation. Such skills not only shape the way we learn to read and answer math problems but also influence how we resolve a conflict with a neighbor or kick a soccer ball. Vygotskians believe that children do not automatically acquire these underlying skills; they require explicit instruction by teachers or parents. As education consultants, we have seen the way skillful teachers of young children help their students acquire these crucial competencies, laying a foundation for academic learning without overemphasizing academics before children are ready.

## **From Reactive Thinking . . .**

To understand the importance of these underlying skills, consider the mind of the preschool child. Vygotskians, like many other psychologists, describe the thinking of 2- and 3-year-old children as dominated by sensation and perception. Preschool children’s thinking is *reactive*: They react to the most salient characteristic or the first thing that comes to their minds, whether or not it



is important to the situation (Vygotsky, 1956). For example, when you ask preschool children to “get up, wash your hands, and sit down at the table,” most children react to either the first direction or the last direction. Many just do what the other children are doing. When children see a toy that they want, they often grab it, regardless of who else is playing with the toy. Such reactions represent an immediate response to what children see and feel rather than a premeditated act.

Their reactive thinking also keeps young children from doing what Vygotsky called “learning on demand.” Preschool children’s ability to learn depends on repetition or on an experience being personally meaningful. Children can remember information only when it is presented in a repetitive and exciting way—such as the letter A jumping out of a box and dancing around over and over again—or when the information is of special interest to them, such as the month of their birthday. Vygotskians argue that this is why young children easily remember the names of dinosaurs or Pokémon characters but take much longer to

learn their phone numbers or the letters of the alphabet.

### . . .To Learning on Demand

One of the key aspects that distinguish formal schooling from preschool is that post-preschool students are able to learn on demand. They can expend mental effort to learn information just because the teacher tells them to learn it, even if it is not particularly interesting or salient. When a teacher gives an elementary class a list of spelling words, for example, students are expected to put effort into learning the words; the teacher will not repeat the information multiple times or use a lot of gimmicks to make the task fun. To succeed in school, a child must make this transition from learning that “follows the child’s own agenda” to learning that “follows the school agenda” (Vygotsky, 1956, p. 426). One of the milestones of the preschool age is the development of intentionality in all areas—from physical behaviors to social interactions to problem solving. From the Vygotskian perspective, the major goal of preschool education for the whole child is to transform a child

who is wholly reactive into one who is wholly intentional.

Ideally, in preschool, children move from reactive thinking to the ability to think *before* they act. Being able to reflect and draw on past experience makes it possible for young children to engage in thoughtful behaviors.

In a study conducted in Alexander Zaporozhets’s lab, a teacher read “Little Red Riding Hood” to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children while an EEG device measured the children’s brain waves (as described in Bodrova & Leong, 2003b). The first time they heard the story read aloud, all the children showed signs of anxiety, indicated by changes in their brain waves, at the part where the wolf jumped out to eat Red Riding Hood. The second time they heard the story, the 3-year-olds showed signs of anxiety at this same point in the story; the 5-year-olds, however, showed signs of nervousness earlier. As soon as the teacher read the part where Red Riding Hood starts on the wrong path through the woods, the pattern of the 5-year-olds’ brain waves changed because the children had already begun to anticipate the wolf. The 5-year-olds’ reactions

to the story were influenced by their memories of the story, meaning they were less reactive and more thoughtful than the younger children. According to Vygotsky, older children's mental functioning is no longer dominated by immediate perception but is influenced by memory.

As children become more thoughtful, learning becomes more efficient and less frustrating for both students and teachers. Teachers spend more time on task and less time trying to get students to pay attention. Students can regulate themselves to participate in activities; they do not depend on "teacher regulation" to stay involved. Students are also better able to learn from previous social experiences, so that mastering social skills becomes easier. By contrast, children who do not develop the ability to regulate their attention and their behaviors before they enter kindergarten face a higher risk of falling behind academically (Blair, 2002).

### The Role of Preschool

How can early childhood teachers help children develop the ability to act with forethought and intention, which will help them learn in later grades? The teacher's role is especially important; unfortunately, children today have fewer opportunities to learn to regulate themselves because many of the activities that they engage in work counter to developing thoughtful, deliberate action. Television, computer games, even the kinds of toys that children play with tend to emphasize behaviors that lead to more reactive thinking. One 5-year-old told his mom as she tried to play his computer game, "If you could just stop thinking and keep pressing the buttons as fast as you can, Mario would live a lot longer!"

From the Vygotskian perspective, early childhood teachers can foster the development of self-regulation in three ways: by helping children develop mature intentional play, by modifying existing activities to support cognitive skills, and by minimizing or elimi-

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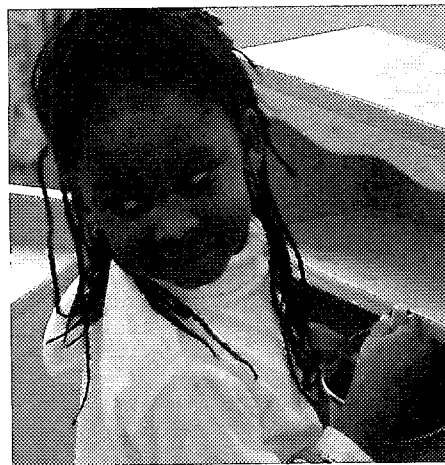


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nating activities that are counterproductive to developing such skills. Following are examples of these strategies that we have seen at work in preschool classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

### Scaffolding Intentional Play

Mature intentional play is dramatic play in which children act out specific roles and plan their play (Elkonin, 1978; Vygotsky, 1977). Children describe the pretend scenario in advance and decide who will play what role and what will happen. They have to solve social problems when they have differing ideas about how play should proceed, as shown in this exchange:

*Marcia:* Let's pretend we're going on an airplane. We have to get tickets, take our passports, and then we go through security and get on the plane. I'll be the mom, and I'll have my baby.

*Kim:* I don't want to be a mom. I want to be the pilot. I'll take your ticket, and then I'll fly the airplane. You'll sit in the plane and eat.

*Marcia:* OK, you're the pilot, but then you help with the babies.

To play their parts, children need to remember the many actions that are

going to occur; they practice the underlying skills of deliberate memory, focused attention, and self-regulation in this kind of play. In our work in classrooms, we have found that teachers need to incorporate support for this kind of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a). Young children need guidance to get the play going, to discuss play, and to act out what was planned.

### Modifying Preschool Activities

A second way to foster self-regulation is to modify existing activities. For example, early childhood teachers regularly read books aloud and ask questions about the story to teach listening comprehension skills. By modifying this activity, a teacher can use a read-aloud to foster self-regulation.

Preschool teacher Sungu Hwang has children retell the story after he reads it aloud. The students sit in a circle and pass a "talking stick" to one another in turn, each child ending his or her comment with the words "and then . . .". The talking stick ensures that children take turns, giving them practice in self-regulation. Repeating "and then . . ." helps them remember that the next person must add on to the story. During the first retelling, Mr. Hwang keeps the book open to the pictures to provide support; after a few readings, students recall the story on their own.

### Minimizing

#### Counterproductive Activities

The third way to promote self-regulation is to identify and modify classroom settings that work against the development of these competencies. In our experience, we have found that both extremely chaotic classrooms and extremely teacher-directed classrooms are counterproductive to developing

## AIMS OF EDUCATION

*What is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual's total development lags behind?*

—Maria Montessori

self-regulation and other underlying skills in children. Classrooms where children flit from activity to activity support reactive behavior. But when all the instruction is whole-group, students become too teacher-regulated.

One preschool teacher we observed in rural Iowa noticed that her students were most likely to get out of control as they transitioned from playtime in classroom centers to a group read-aloud. When she simply told students to clean up and come sit on the carpet, many returned to their play instead of cleaning up; the teacher found herself continually "policing" cleanup and leading children one at a time to the carpet to start the read-aloud. She realized that excess teacher regulation and the amount of time some children had to sit waiting were making this transition chaotic, so she modified the routine to encourage self-regulation. Now as playtime ends, the teacher plays a tape of the song "Down By the Bay." Students know to start putting their toys away as soon as they hear the line "Did you ever see a bear?" They know when they hear the phrase "llamas eating pajamas" that the song will end soon and that they need to hurry and finish. This teacher now looks forward to cleanup time as an opportunity for students to practice self-regulation.

Preschool environments like these that nurture foundational cognitive skills are not incompatible with nurturing academic skills. Including

underlying cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional competencies in our definition of what is needed to educate the whole child will help educators build the skills children need to be active, lifelong learners. Preschool educators should view academic skills and concepts as valuable tools in the process of developing these essential competencies—not as the end goal of preschool education. ■

<sup>1</sup>Some examples are composites of practices we have seen in several classrooms. All names are pseudonyms.

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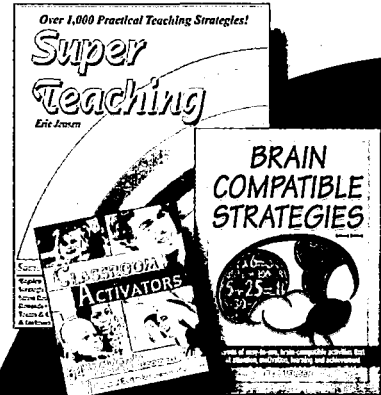
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