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Fulfilling our Promise: The Prospects of Early Childhood Education

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[GOOD Blog](#) > [Sophia Pappas](#) on December 28, 2009 at 7:00 am PST



A teacher reflects on her work in early childhood education, and how Obama's policies might move it forward.

I found my calling in a pile of vomit and a smile.

The vomit came from one of my pre-kindergarten students, Tyrique, whose anxiety about transitioning to school made him physically sick. He was unsure about whether school would bring him the same joy he

experienced playing with his mother and two sisters at home. I soon learned that in addition to needing support in adjusting to new routines, Tyrique was behind in basic literacy and cognitive skills.

The smile also came from Tyrique, every day after the third week of school, when he would express his excitement to be with his friends. One day in particular, late in the spring, Tyrique was reading independently after breakfast. I asked if we could read together because I always wanted to read the book he had chosen. We took turns and for the first time, he managed to sound out a word on his own. He turned to me with a huge smile and said, "Ms. Pappas, I'm a good reader." Right then, my interest in teaching was solidified.

His trajectory from an anxious newcomer without an understanding of what a letter is to a self-confident early reader required strategic and steadfast efforts to identify and meet his needs. I paid attention to everything, from the toys and stories that piqued his interest to his specific skill deficits, in order to create individualized learning plans that maximized every moment.

"The achievement gap starts before kindergarten and high quality early learning experiences can give children from disadvantaged areas the enriching introduction to school they deserve."



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About the author:



Sophia Pappas — is a Student and Author living in Cambridge, MA



Tyrique's story and the growth of all the students I taught in Newark, New Jersey, highlighted the reality that the achievement gap starts before kindergarten and the ability for high quality early learning experiences to give children from disadvantaged areas the enriching introduction to school they deserve.

Yet despite these successes, I stood in front of my students and their families on graduation day with mixed feelings. I was proud of our accomplishments, but I felt anxious about the quality of early childhood programs across the country and in K-12.

A strong start is necessary, but cannot on its own advance equal opportunity without being part of a broader continuum of high-quality education. While New Jersey and other states have made strides in increasing systemic cohesion, early childhood education across the country remains, to a large extent, both internally fragmented and disjointed from the larger K-12 system in everything from funding streams and governing structures to content standards and pedagogy. Young children entering kindergarten may have attended early childhood programs in a wide range of settings with various standards and approaches.

President Obama's early childhood policies introduce the possibility for real change by not only creating opportunities for states to receive funding, but by transforming the way that early childhood policy is shaped. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Secretary of Health & Human Services Kathleen Sebelius have joined forces to advance common definitions of quality across early childhood programs. Two of their top advisors, Jacqueline Jones (DOE) and Joan Lombardi (HHS), have engaged both agencies in discussions around key issues, described recently at a research summit at Georgetown University. Their shared leadership model and discussion of diverse perspectives affords the opportunity to mobilize the two agencies around a collective purpose, while also leveraging the unique insights and expertise each one brings to the table.

The promise of early childhood education is really the promise of a leveled playing field. I am confident that the approach and content of new initiatives are a crucial step towards fulfilling that promise.

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Everyone's Responses



Karen Nemeth 4 days ago



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Hi, Sophia. Great article and great comments! I agree that it seems children from disadvantaged backgrounds often have issues with self-regulation, but I don't think we have enough research yet to know that Behavioral approaches are the answer. I hope somebody is working hard on that question right now! I want to add another piece to the discussion: keep thinking about the role language differences play in the achievement gap. In order for high quality preschool to work, especially in disadvantaged communities, teachers need strategies and programs need resources to successfully meet the needs of low-income families who also speak little English. We need to step up our efforts on that front!



Sophia Pappas 4 days ago

Bern,

Thanks so much for your response and interest in early childhood education. My main priority as a classroom teacher was to provide my students with a strong foundation of skills they would need to realize their potential. Since each child entered my room with diverse needs and interests, I had to use information about individual children and the class as a whole to move everyone forward. To be successful, I had to be pragmatic. I used a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic consequences, reflected on the success of these strategies on an ongoing basis, and adjusted my approaches where necessary.

You can learn more about these strategies in my recently published memoir, Good Morning, Children <http://www.gryphonhouse.com/store/trans/productDetailForm.asp?BookID=12745>

I am also happy to continue our conversation via email. You can contact me at earlychild@sophiapappas.com.



Bern Neil 4 days ago

Sophia, Your interactions with Tyrique are examples of high quality, developmentally appropriate practice in Early Childhood Education. While teaching preschool in Newark, did you need to take a more Behaviorist approach for your classroom management? If you can, please comment on intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation and adapting DAP for these students. All preschoolers are learning to control their impulses, but anecdotally speaking, children with low SES often have a more difficult time with mastery. I am not certain that being purely developmentally appropriate will help these students gain the impulse control that they need for future school success. Bern P.S. I would love to hear from anyone on this topic



Jesse James 7 days ago

I agree with Ms. Pappas in the fact that increasing the quality of early education as a whole will indeed bridge the achievement gap. As a teacher in a Primrose School in NC, I was fortunate to work with children who had a quality base knowledge that they received from their parents who cared about their education. At Primrose Schools we dealt with children of very different ethnic backgrounds and it was nice to see that for the most part, they were all very near each other in terms of academic ability.

Lessening the gap truly does begin with ECE and quality teachers who care about their students, such as Ms. Pappas.

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