

Notes on EdFunders Listening Session on Early Education and Literacy

January 21, 2015

Speakers

- **Nell Duke**, Professor of Literacy, Language and Culture; Faculty Affiliate, Combined Program in Education and Psychology, University of Michigan
- **Bernadette Fitzgerald**, Principal, PS 503
- **Chanda Hill**, Assistant Executive Director for Early Childhood, SCO Family of Services
- **Peggy McNamara**, Chair, General Teacher Education Department, Bank Street College of Education
- **Tala Manasseh**, Deputy Executive Director, Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility
- **Sarah Walzer**, Executive Director, The Parent-Child Home Program

Moderator:

Robert Hughes, President of New Visions for Public Schools

Setting the Context

Shael Polakow-Suransky, President of Bank Street College of Education, welcomed participants, describing what Bank Street sees as the central task of early childhood education: to create an emotionally responsive learning environment that supports executive function and content knowledge.

Robert Hughes, who moderated all the EdFunders' listening sessions, noted the deep commitment made by New York City to improve early childhood literacy – and education more broadly – by expanding full-day pre-K and also by incorporating the exciting new knowledge that is emerging about brain development and how children learn into City programs. He introduced Nell Duke, who laid out two key framing questions for the session:

- What are critical elements of literacy-focused education for children from birth to age 8?
- What can be done to put more of those elements into more settings that will serve more of New York City's young children?

Duke's powerpoint is available here:

What are critical elements of early and primary literacy-focused education?

She identified the following elements critical for achieving comprehension:

- Oral language, *especially vocabulary*, which affects every aspect of comprehension.
- Concepts of print and the varying roles it can play in our environment.
- Genre: understanding different kinds of print, such as stories, poems and shopping lists.
- Phonological awareness: The ability to hear different sounds inside a word.
- Sound-letter relationships: Understanding the connection between letters and their sounds.
- Word reading by decoding, analogy and sight
- Reading fluency: Accuracy, pace and prosody (expressive reading)
- Composition: The ability to write

Duke added that these elements are themselves complex and challenging to teach, but for students to understand what they are reading – to “comprehend” – they must be supplemented by broad world knowledge, thinking and reasoning skills, social-emotional skills, executive function and motivation. And, she commented, research also makes clear that a wide range of health-related factors (e.g., lead paint exposure, nutrition, ear infections) also affect reading and writing development.

A key takeaway:

Teaching early literacy really is rocket science, and requires a great deal of knowledge to do well.

What is needed to ensure that those critical elements are effectively implemented in New York City’s early education programs and primary schools?

Duke proposed the following steps:

- **Start early**
Literacy development can’t wait until kindergarten. It must start with families and the early child care settings where children will be.
- **Build strong family ties around literacy**
Duke commented that this is in line with the NYC DoE’s Capacity Framework calling for strong school-family ties. She recommended that practitioners use evidence-based approaches to build the capacity of families to promote literacy.
- **Build strong community ties around literacy**
More than 60% of children in the US under six are cared for in a non-parental care setting, where they spend, on average, more than 30 hours a week. These more than 30 hours can have a huge impact on children’s development if those hours are enriching of

children's literacy. But research shows that, typically, child care providers do not implement practices associated with children's literacy growth. However, it also shows that *just 10 hours of professional development* significantly improves provider practices around child literacy.

- **Leverage outside-of-school-time programming**
She noted again the importance of attending to whether programs implement the evidence-based practices that research says matter for kids. She also called attention to the need for the programs to be engaging, ensuring that the children are actually there to participate in the evidence-based practices.
- **Advance school-time programming**
Again, in line with the DoE's Capacity Framework: School practices should be better aligned with the research and what works for children. This, she concluded, requires professional development: building practitioners' knowledge base and affecting their practices.

Opening discussion (panelists and guests)

What did you consider a key point from Professor Duke's presentation?

Duke's description of teaching literacy as rocket science resonated among panelists and guests. Consequently, panelists identified as a crucial point – and challenge – the need for

- **Effective, evidence-based professional development (PD).**

One element of this is time:

- **Teachers need time to collaborate, reflect, learn and practice.**

A panelist noted that the new contract for teachers in the K-12 public school system had in fact made more time available for collaboration and PD and it is making a difference, but a small difference: *more* time is necessary. Another noted that early childcare staff do not share this contract: it is very difficult to provide adequate PD in community-based programs.

There also was a consensus on Duke's highlighting of the importance of

- **Building strong family and community ties.**

Approaches to doing so, however, varied. Among panelists, those working with the youngest children clearly focus more intentionally on building family capacity to promote literacy than do

those working with children in pre-K and beyond. Schools tend to focus more broadly on building relationships and trust with families than on literacy development.

Panelists also agreed on the need to help children develop social-emotional skills Duke had identified as integral to reading comprehension and to do so rigorously and intentionally (another area in which PD is necessary).

What are the kinds of programs that are available to very young children in New York City?

Panelists cited a number of exemplary programs. Among the publicly funded programs were the Parent Child Home Program and FirstStepNYC. A key criterion for center-based programs, panelists agreed, is family engagement: going into homes and working with parents. Successful engagement of this sort empowers families both to advocate for their children as they move into formal education and to nurture social emotional and literacy development.

What is a policy or strategy that you would scale for young children?

Panelists identified the following policies and strategies:

- Family support specialists who can engage parents and develop their capacity to foster social emotional and literacy development
- Increased PD:
 - Embedded PD through master teachers who can provide professional development in the center/classroom
 - Time for professional development of professionals along the spectrum zero - 8
- Universal pre- and early natal care, which would address the health-related factors Duke had highlighted as related to literacy development

Members of the audience identified additional policies they would advocate, including higher pay for early childhood professionals. One guest noted that some early child care workers make only the minimum wage and, citing the panelists' call to invest in teachers, urged that early childhood teachers in all settings receive higher pay. Another noted that the infrastructure of zero-3 education in NYC is different from that of education of older children: it is not only under-resourced but also "an unregulated space." Many thousands of New York City children are in daycare settings with only very minimal resources, including limited access to capacity building. A first – but long-term – step is to start to build the essential infrastructure; the efforts to do so for four-years as pre-K more than doubled this year are a testament to the challenges.

What are the basic attributes of a center-based child care program that all programs should have?

Panelists identified three key attributes:

- Teacher salaries that are equivalent to what the Department of Education (DoE) pays pre-kindergarten teachers, in order to retain excellent teachers who would otherwise go into the DoE pre-K setting.
- Environment and materials that enable children to explore their world
- Ongoing professional development that enables teachers to create that environment and use the materials effectively.

What are specific practices that should be scaled?

Panelists identified several practices that should be scaled:

- Extended childcare and education that lasts until 6 pm, the end of the workday
- Wrap-around services – medical, dental, mental health services, all happening collaboratively in the school building, so that the school becomes the hub for the families to receive an array of services
- Ongoing support for teachers, including ongoing PD throughout the school year

Audience members then asked probing questions about the role of schools of education, the challenges facing principals of schools who are newly responsible for pre-kindergarten programs, and the role of bilingual programs.

End of Opening Session

Closing Summary

Walzer began by calling attention to a signal achievement of the morning: that so many and such diverse stakeholders had come together to talk about a system that serves children prenatal to age 8. Thinking about that entire span and the importance of building a system that reaches families, children and all the caregivers and teachers who work with them during that zero-8 span is, she underlined, such a huge step forward. But, she also said that this event was really the *beginning* of a conversation.

It had highlighted that too many children today enter school without the vocabulary, oral language and social-emotional skills that they need to be successful there. Participants from different constituencies all had called for better support for families and better support for teachers. Many had also acknowledged that, while New York City had made tremendous progress by offering full-day pre-K to more than 50,000 four-year-olds, early education must begin before children reach four years old and there is not yet a system for that.

One crucial policy change, she noted, that seemed to underlie all the priorities articulated by panelists and break-out groups is **the need to allocate more funding**. Walzer urged everyone in the room who had stressed the importance of zero-8 education to work to increase the funding available for early education so that the priorities they identified –

- Professional development, which requires both money and time, for teachers and also for family child care providers and parents – teaching reading, she reiterated, *is rocket science*
- Social-emotional learning should be embedded in all of the work we do with families and in schools
- Parents should be reached where they are, by home visiting or other support services
- Community schools, which may “wrap around” the other priorities –

can be implemented fully and effectively.

Walzer concluded by noting that the prenatal to 8 continuum that drove discussion at the session is not yet widely recognized by the public or policy makers as a single continuum. As many speakers had pointed out, prenatal to 8 care and education remain in many different silos, differently structured and funded. The session today began to break down silos. She set out a challenge for participants: to continue breaking down the silos by sharing information and learning across the entire spectrum with teachers, professionals and parents.

Attachment One

Notes on the FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS BREAKOUT GROUP

Facilitated by Danielle Pulliam (Pinkerton Foundation)
and Jennifer John (Literacy Inc.)

Which practices should be changed, added to fill a gap, or replicated?

The group started by discussing what young children, zero to three, should be able to know and do to be ready for kindergarten. There was widespread agreement that children develop differently: it is normal to have diversity in children in terms of what they know and can do at different ages. This suggested a need to think in terms of developmental stages, rather than grade by grade expectations. The group also agreed on the importance of recognizing that child development encompasses more than cognition. Motor skills, social and emotional development: those should be part of a discussion that extends out beyond classrooms and involve a wide range of people who touch children's lives.

Several participants brought up the need for educators to engage medical providers – doctors and especially nurses – more closely so that the health care providers can help families identify appropriate literacy as well as health milestones and guide parents to help their children achieve them. Several participants pointed out that children see doctors and nurses long before they encounter professional educators. They should be equipped with knowledge about child development in the broadest sense and tools they can give families to foster that development, including the importance of talking regularly and frequently with children and of reading to them every day.

Others noted that engaging in activities with children – inside and outside the home – can build the vocabulary Duke had highlighted as critical. Encouragement to include even very small children in activities like cooking or grocery shopping and to use those or other everyday activities to foster literacy and other skills is something educators, health providers and other who engage with children, from barbers to firefighters who host tours of the firehouse, should be modeling and doing.

Participants agreed that, to implement these practices across the city, child care providers and teachers need more professional development, including training on how to meet and engage families where they are. They suggested community schools as another strategy that would help, noting community schools reach even families whose children are not yet in school.

Where might additional funding be best allocated?

Participants agreed on the importance of providing additional funds for professional development and offered a range of suggestions on how to do so:

- Fellowships to enable uncertified teachers to get the experience and training they need for certification
- Support for master teachers or coaches in early childhood classrooms or centers

They also called for higher pay for all child care workers and greater investment in all the adults who touch children's lives. One suggestion was for more funding for simple tools – videos, apps – that could help families and others who work with children understand and implement evidence-based practices – including engaging ways to read with children.

The group also agreed on the importance of ensuring access to adequate healthcare and nutrition. As one put it, “A healthy child is a child who can learn.”

What policy changes would help improve this work?

The group called for much greater connection between formal education starting with pre-K and children's lives before that. One way to effect this would be policies that encourage healthcare providers to work closely with child care providers and educators. They also suggested policies that encourage more attention to transitions between different stages of education or care.

In addition, they called for rethinking licensing requirements and teacher education, including ensuring all teachers know the critical elements of literacy development and what the evidence shows works to develop them.

There were also suggestions about policies that help close the digital divide, ensuring that the simple tools created to help families and communities support child development and literacy are genuinely accessible to all.

Attachment Two

Notes on the SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING BREAKOUT GROUP

Facilitated by Megan McAllister (The Altman Foundation)
and Evelyn Blanck (New York Center for Child Development)

Which practices should be changed, added to fill a gap, or replicated?

Participants agreed that that successful programs integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) with academic learning and there is conscious recognition of what each adds to the other. Some noted that many teachers are not being trained in SEL and that all should be. As one participant put it, “SEL is the core of early childhood education.”

Thus, early childhood teachers must learn about child development – by doing as well as by reading or listening – and early childhood curricula should explicitly address SEL.

Additionally, participants agreed that the parent or primary caregiver relationship has to be at the root of how SEL is fostered and commended programs that reached out directly to parents and caregivers, in their homes or through support and wrap-around services. They identified effective strategies for reaching parents and families outside of the school, including partnerships with healthcare providers and social service agencies. Others suggested working with bodegas and other sites (e.g., laundromats) where families congregate. A crucial element of successful program is a strength-based approach: building on what parents are doing and seeing parents as learning partners rather than objects of instruction.

Some suggested expanding the use of mass media to inform both families and home-based child care providers about key elements of SEL and how to foster it. One speaker noted that the City still has a TV station that could program content related to SEL. DVDs were also suggested as a possibility. Others urged direct outreach through neighborhood and faith-based initiatives, using community and religious centers as vehicles to inform families about SEL and development.

Participants also agreed on the value of expanding programs that engage older children and adolescents in working with younger ones. There was widespread agreement on the benefits of this for both the younger and the older children. One speaker noted that such programs could open a wider pathway into early childhood education for boys and men, citing Jumpstart an example of a program “that works to spread a wide net and identify good candidates.”

Where might additional (or reallocated) funding best be used?

Participants identified several areas for additional funding, including prenatal care. They cited programs, such as the Nurse-Family Partnership, that helped ensure that babies were born healthy and also inculcated parental practices that fostered parent-child bonding and child development.

There was also a consensus on the need for more professional development in various forms: mentoring; master teachers; opportunities for collaboration and reflection.

In addition, participants called for funding in the following areas:

- Parenting education that is embedded in the community
- Ensuring a continuum of emotionally responsive support for families, including training parent coordinators in outreach to families of younger children
- Enabling wrap-around services and true community schools in neighborhoods across the City
- Providing greater resources, including pay equity and professional development for teachers, to early childhood education and care

What policy changes would help improve this work?

Participants identified a number of policy changes that would improve the City's ability to inculcate social and emotional learning for children, families, and communities. They noted that one crucial policy change would be providing adequate funding for the strategies they had prioritized. They highlighted especially the need to

- Build and support community schools
- Help children with transitions – from informal to formal education, pre-K – K; K – primary; primary to middle school and middle school to high school
- Strengthen funding and support for early childhood providers.

Participants also urged the City to recognize the critical importance of family and community relationships. One example cited was rethinking how the Human Resources Administration (HRA) addresses work programs and requirements for young parents in ways that would buttress parenting skills and bonding with children.

Attachment 3

Notes on the **BUILDING VOCABULARY AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE BREAKOUT GROUP**
Facilitated by Matthew Miller (United Way of New York City)
and Alice Tan (New York Public Library)

Which practices should be changed, added to fill a gap, or replicated?

Participants had a rich discussion of best practices and how to replicate them across the City. In the course of the discussion, several participants commented that the expansion of high stakes testing had undermined replication of best practices. The group as a whole urged *less* focus on testing and *more* on professional development, both pre-service and in-service, for teachers, day care providers and administrators.

Some participants suggested that higher education has a responsibility to prepare teachers for the classroom and to continue to develop them and called for institutions of higher ed to rethink professional development for pre- and in-service teachers. The group agreed that professional development should change to incorporate

- Less “desk-based” training
- More practice in classrooms
- More emphasis on how to create safe and engaging school environments – including using play to promote learning
- More attention to developing school leadership
- A focus on early education and how to promote literacy

In addition, they called for professional development for childcare and early education providers as well as classroom teachers to include how to work with and engage parents, families and caregivers in fostering literacy.

Among the best practices the group cited were

- Class trips: using community assets (e.g., museums, community centers, firehouses) outside of the classroom
- Project-based learning
- Programs, including digital ones, that train parents how to use everyday experiences (e.g., grocery shopping, street signs, cooking) to build vocabulary and promote literacy

Where might additional (or re-allocated) funding be best used?

Participants urged that funding be used to support the best practices it had identified, including expansion and rethinking of professional development.

In addition, they urged that more funding be allocated to

- Increase the access of all children to high quality early education
- Support research that identifies and further develops best practices – e.g., develops the evidence base and then trains more teachers in the best practices
- Help families understand the best practices and how they can implement them at home
- Enable collaboration among practitioners
- Public libraries, which provide safe and literacy-enhancing environments for young children on their own premises and also promote literacy-enhancing practices at home

What policy changes would help improve this work?

In its discussion of best practices, members of the group had expressed their concern that the focus on high-stakes testing inhibits creative and innovative teacher practices. Some saw the emphasis on testing as a “gotcha” game. Accordingly, the key policy change for which they advocated was changing the way that schools and teachers are evaluated to encourage creative and collaborative teaching. They called for rethinking school and teacher evaluations to ensure that they are fair and support implementation of best practices.

Attachment Four

Notes on the **POLICY SHIFT BREAKOUT GROUP**
Facilitated by Elizabeth Olofson (Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation)
And Gail Nayowith (Consultant)

Which practices should be changed, added to fill a gap, or replicated?

The group identified areas in which change in practice – and policy – is vital to improving opportunities for all children to develop literacy skills:

- **System articulation:** Participants discussed how complex and complicated the system is for supporting young children and their families. Creating a coherent structure that can communicate across organizations and (City) agencies, allowing families and practitioners to understand and engage with what is in each neighborhood, would be a vast improvement
- **Leadership development:** Leaders of early education programs need to have access to the same training and skill development as principals, including around content. They need training not only in early education but also in how early education supports primary education – they must understand the 0-8 continuum that shaped the discussion today. Participants urged that advocacy be included among the leadership skills developed, enabling leaders from the field to advocate for the changes they see as necessary. One best practice cited was the FirstStepNYC program in Brownsville, where the early ed director works closely with the principals of both the primary and the middle school with which her early ed program is co-located. Scaling of this pilot, participants noted, is challenging but possible
- **Pay and benefit equity:** To ensure high quality teaching for all children, from the youngest (zero) through the school career, participants called for providing pay equity in the different sectors. Otherwise, professionals will continue to be pulled from the zero-3 group to earn better salaries and benefits in primary and secondary education
- **Career development:** Participants noted that pay equity alone would not ensure quality teaching in every center, classroom, or home-based care. They also encouraged development of a career pipeline that would enable excellent teachers and assistants both to stay in their positions and continue to develop professionally as well as to take on more leadership and responsibility within their program or field

The group noted that, for families of older children, schools, especially community schools, could serve as a hub. But, for this genuinely to work, schools must also be connected with early care and education programs and encourage and support family involvement.

Where might additional (or re-allocated) funding be best used?

The group identified building the infrastructure to support the aligning of early care and education systems as the first priority, identifying the need for a **comprehensive and coherent**

database that identifies vacancies for teachers *and* children and includes the entire continuum of services available for children from 0-8.

The group also identified **full funding for Early Learn**, which participants identified as poorly funded but “in intent and design where we ... would want to be” as a priority. In addition, they called for more funding to enable two of the changes they had cited as key priorities: **Equity across the system, including for new models of professional development and building a career pipeline**. Finally, they called for **full funding of Quality Stars**, the New York State rating system that would allow us to be sure that every early education experience is a good and high quality one.

What policy changes would help improve this work?

Members of the group observed that implementation and scaling of the practices they advocated would involve significant policy changes and, perhaps, even a different vision of the system. They laid out four principles that underlie their vision:

- Early education begins prenatally
- There must be level specific leadership credentials (What is needed to support pre-K is not the same as what is needed to support high school students and teachers)
- Salary parity among different sectors and school levels
- Every child has the right to access excellent, affordable early care and education