
[Play-based vs. formal academic early childhood education](#)

[Debate](#)

Child development

Which approach should countries follow to improve early foundations for learning? Two experts discuss different approaches to early childhood education in light of the need for developmentally appropriate learning, community concerns with academic preparation, and the impact of testing and assessment in the younger years.

With the inclusion of early childhood development and pre-primary education in the international Sustainable Development Goals, education planners around the world must decide what kinds of early childhood programming to invest in. On the one hand, there is a concern with offering children play-based learning experiences that are seen as developmentally appropriate for this age group. On the other hand, the concern that young children be well-prepared for primary school often leads to an emphasis on formal academic instruction. While these approaches are not mutually exclusive, in practice there is some controversy as to which early childhood education methods represent the best investment for education systems hoping to improve early foundations for learning.

The IIEP Learning Portal's Catherine Honeyman spoke with Dr. Alexander J. Smith, Early Childhood Development Director at Bridge International Academies, and Dr. Helge Wasmuth, Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Childhood Education at Mercy College (USA), to discuss the controversy between play-based and academic approaches to early childhood education.

Following is a transcript of the discussion, or listen below.

Q1: Just to give us some background on the terms we're using, what does a typical day at a formal academic preschool look like, and what would you say a typical day at a play-based preschool looks like?

Alexander J. Smith: For some context, in early childhood education at Bridge, we're trying to develop the whole child and provide a foundation for success and opportunity. What our communities most value are improvements in language acquisition and in academics, and we're always trying to balance respecting the wishes of our communities and also incorporating the best practices. So in a typical day at Bridge, a 4 or 5-year-old would read a decodable book, do addition sums using plastic bottle caps as counters, learn new words through actions and pictures, sing a nursery rhyme, build with blocks, nap, and also play outside. So for our academic preschool, play is an essential part, but

it's not the only method we use to help kids learn.

Q2: Helge, what would you say about the difference between these two contrasting approaches?

Helge Wasmuth: We now have decades of research that show very well that young children learn best when they are active learners—when they can have hands-on experiences, when they can move around when they can use their senses, when they can interact with children and adults in meaningful ways. And that's something that I think play-based preschools try to implement. In child-centred or child-guided activities, the kids are able to use their interests, to use their knowledge, and the teachers are listening to what the children are interested in and what they are learning. Also in the play-based preschool, normally it's not only about academics, it's about the whole child. So it's a much more holistic approach and we are focusing on the physical, socio-emotional, and of course cognitive development as well.

Q3: Helge, what would you say are the major points of controversy around play-based and academic early childhood education? Why do some prefer one approach over the other?

Helge Wasmuth: The first thing that I would like to say is that the whole discussion shouldn't be framed as a dichotomy. It is very clear that it's possible to infuse academic learning with a more play-based or developmentally-appropriate approach to learning. That's not a problem at all, I think. And in fact, you can see in the best programs that normally it is like this. We have very clear academic goals, but we're trying to achieve them in a developmentally appropriate way. So I think that both things—teacher-guided and children-guided activities—have roles to play in high quality early childhood education. But why is it controversial? Right now, we are living in an era of standards, of testing, and accountability, and what we can see right now is that it's more and more going towards teacher-directed instruction. So we have more passive learning, we have more memorization in the classroom, and I think that's what many experts are concerned about because that's not how our children learn best. And research shows very well that this kind of instruction, this kind of learning—maybe it's successful in the short term, where we can see good results on tests if we have these kinds of programs that are focusing on the test—but in the long-term, that's not the kind of learning we would like to see here with the children. Because they don't develop the skills they need: like creativity, like self-regulation, problem-solving. This is all not achieved, or in my opinion, it's more difficult to achieve it, if you do more formal instruction.

Q4: Alex, you mention that the parents and the communities that you work with place a great importance on having some formal directed academic instruction, even in the early years. Can you talk a little more about that?

Alexander J. Smith: What we find is that parents—even in the early childhood years—at the end of grading period, will want to share exams and compare those with neighbours' exams, and quiz children about what they know and don't know. These are outcomes that they can see: whether their kids know vocabulary, whether they can decode basic words, whether they can count. Handwriting is very important in the community. So those are all signals to parents that education is preparing their children for what they know primary education will be. In describing our approach, we certainly take that into account and we think it's important to develop early literacy and early numeracy. But we aren't bound to that, or bound to education practices we don't think are strong. And even though parents aren't looking for anything beyond language acquisition and also these academics, we are certainly looking at how kids are developing in the other domains as well. Parents' proxy for that is "are they happy?" I think ours is: are they developing the motor skills that help them succeed both

outdoors and indoors in class; are they developing self-regulation and things like that?

Q5: Helge, I'd also like to hear your perspective on the role for assessment in the early years. How can we tell if early childhood education programs are accomplishing what they are supposed to?

Helge Wasmuth: First of all, about the role for assessment, if you're asking "is there a role for assessment?", I think this question needs to be answered with a clear yes. Assessment is one of the most important instruments of high-quality early childhood education, because we need to observe our students as often as possible, in different situations, in different activities. Because teachers somehow need to learn about the students, and they need to see what the students already know, what they do not know, what their interests are, so they can plan accordingly. Many people, and especially many policy-makers, have a very limited understanding of assessment. So when they hear the word "assessment" all they think about is testing. First of all, many of the most important skills that we want the children to develop—again, something like problem-solving or self-regulation—can't be assessed on a test. It's just impossible. We need teachers who can really observe and see these kinds of skills, and can answer the question of whether students are really developing these kinds of skills. The problem we have right now is that children are tested too often, too early, and very often in a way that is not meaningful.

Q6: I think you have both given some very interesting perspectives on how these two approaches can be complementary. Alex, do you have any final suggestions to give education planners who are working on achieving large-scale access to early childhood education in their countries?

Alexander J. Smith: My reflection on this conversation, and my advice, would be: The sooner that a plan or a blueprint or a curriculum can meet the reality of the classroom and be informed by that in its development, the more likely it's going to be successful. A common pitfall is ending up with a binder of curriculum or a new plan that cannot be executed or isn't adopted in the field. So I'd say—get whatever the plan is to the people who will be using it as soon as possible, to make it better.

Q7: Thank you, Alex. Helge, do you have any final thoughts to share?

Helge Wasmuth: In these days, you very often here: okay, we just have to fix the schools or the pre-kindergarten. I think something that people who want to invest in early childhood education need to consider and need to be aware of is: it's not cheap and we will need to invest a lot of money because it's not only about the schools. The schools are part of the problem that needs to be fixed, but we also need to invest in healthcare, in proper prenatal and infant care, in parent education, and of course, we need to invest in teacher education as well. Teacher education is one of the most important things—if we have teachers who are well-educated, who know how to observe, to assess people, to implement a curriculum, then we will have schools that are much more successful. So there are many areas where I think people need to invest if we really want to achieve a high-quality education for everyone in the younger years.

Thank you both very much for sharing your views with the IIEP Learning Portal.

Further reading

Katz, L. Lively minds: [Distinctions between academic versus intellectual goals for young children.](#)

Snow, K. [Research News You Can Use: Debunking the Play vs. Learning Dichotomy](#)

Marcon, R. (2002). [Moving up the grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success](#)

Preschool Experience in 10 Countries: [Cognitive and Language Performance at Age 7](#)

[Bridge International Academies: Tools](#)

[Defending play with Nancy Carlsson-Paige](#) (video)

[View PDF](#)

- [Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments