

A Commonwealth for Children

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I want to thank Libby Doggett of pre[k]now, Margaret Blood of Early Education for All and Strategies for Children, and all of you for everything you have done for advancing the cause of universal preschool education. It really is advancing; the pace has picked up a lot recently, because of you. So you should congratulate yourselves, heartily.

Margaret told me not to make my talk too “Massachusetts-ocentric;” I won’t but many of my examples are from Massachusetts, because some of the first preschool programs in the United States started here. Elizabeth Peabody, the godmother of the American kindergarten started the first English-speaking kindergarten in the United States in Boston in 1860 in a public school near here. But much of what I’m going to say was common throughout the country, as you’ll see, so this isn’t just about Massachusetts.

I want to tell you a story. I’m a historian of education and historians tell stories. I’m going to tell you a story about three interconnected themes in preschool policy:

1. multiple providers,
2. quality, and
3. workforce.

My story has some lessons from the past that I hope will help us move forward. I strongly believe that if we don’t remember our past and call upon it when we need it, we may lose our way in the future.

Dame Schools

In the beginning...there were dame schools, small, informal schools run by women in their homes, much like family day care today, for children between the ages of about two and six. Of course most parents taught their children at home, but many also paid neighborhood women, often widows, to teach their young children how to read, spell, and do a little counting. Dame schools were necessary, in part, because colonial laws and customs required children to already be able to read before they entered town schools. Dame school teachers used the famous *New England Primer* which some of you may have seen, which had pictures for each letter, beginning with “A In Adam’s Fall we sinned all.” They also taught children arithmetic by counting beans, for instance, and had the children help with daily chores.

Dame schools were “multiple providers.” Parents could choose where they wanted to send their young children, and often chose the dame school that was the closest to

where they lived. John Adams went to Mrs. Belcher's dame school across the street from his house in Braintree. Adams liked Mrs. Belcher, and not just because she rewarded him with three pennies when he helped her carry corn from her farm to the mill (though the money probably helped). Adams's parents probably paid Mrs. Belcher about four or five pence a week, the average salary for dame school teachers during the late colonial era, and may also have given her some vegetables, wheat, and firewood. So the tradition of very low salaries in preschool education goes all the way back.

The quality of dame schools varied enormously. Most dame school teachers had very little education, maybe only what they had learned in dame school themselves, or in the town school, if it allowed girls to attend, which most didn't, though girls gradually "crept" in. Some dame school teachers learned a lot on their own and were very well respected, others didn't and weren't. So quality and how to raise the quality of the workforce were important issues from the beginning, too.

Note that dame schools were called "schools," but that they also provided child care. This was before the big divide, the flood when early education and child care got separated and put on different arks. Parents and society in the colonial era did not distinguish between preschool education and child care. But it's important, I think, that these homes were called "schools." John Adams called Mrs. Belcher's house his "school."

And dame schools gradually became town schools. Towns started paying dame school teachers small salaries and giving them places to teach, outside of their houses. In 1758, the town of Braintree paid Mrs. Fessenden 67 cents a week to be a town dame school teacher, and may have given her free space in an attic or old barn, the usual kind of cast-off place where preschools were taught, another quality issue we've had from the beginning. By the early 1800s, many of these dame school teachers had become primary school teachers in the "summer sessions" when they taught younger boys and girls in one-room schools, when the older big boys were out in the fields. Of course, these former dame school teachers were paid much, much less than male teachers and accorded less respect. Sex discrimination was there from the beginning, too, as was low status for any kind of work with young children.

I'm sorry if my story is a little depressing, but this is our history, and it shows us what we've been up against for almost 400 years.

Infant Schools

In the 1820s the first form of preschools designed explicitly for young children, "infant schools," were imported from Europe and England, where Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Robert Owen, and others had started schools for the young children of the poor. In America, infant schools split into two types: charity infant schools with very rigid pedagogy for poor children, and much more liberal private infant schools

for the children of the upper classes. Bronson Alcott, the famously progressive father of Louisa May (who quite noticeably left a father figure out of her bestseller *Little Women*), was an infant school teacher for middle- and upper-class children in Boston for a few years in the late 1820s. The social class divide in preschool programs has been with us from the beginning, too.

In 1830, the women of the Infant School Society of the City of Boston, the women's auxiliary of the men's society which was behind the charity schools for older children which were adopted as public primary schools, asked the Boston School Committee to adopt infant schools. Yes, we might have had public preschools in the public schools for children aged three and four back in the early nineteenth century, but the School Committee turned them down. The reasons won't surprise you.

What was number one, money, right, always money?

The other reasons will sound familiar, too: lack of support from primary school teachers who said that infant school children were hard to control.

New research that claimed that preschool education harmed the physical and mental development of young children and made them dangerously precocious.

And new Romantic, as in Romanticism the cultural movement, ideals of women as mothers, children as innocents, families as refuges, and homes as sacred private spaces.

All of these things are still with us, too. Competition with the upper grades; worries that child care and preschool might harm children; gendered sex roles about women's responsibilities as mothers; and romanticization of family life and young children. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that being at home with their mothers isn't a good place for young children, but it's not real-world in a world in which more than half of mothers of young children under five work outside of the home and good quality early education in some amount has been shown to help children academically and in many other ways.

So the infant school movement failed and poor young children were sent back to the streets, to tenements, to factories, and to school with their older brothers and sisters, if the teacher would let them in, which many did. About 40% of three-year-olds were enrolled in public schools in Massachusetts in 1839-1840, according to historian Maris Vinovskis. Children from wealthier families went home to their mothers, governesses, and servants.

The Kindergarten Movement

Next came the kindergarten, started in Germany in the 1830s by Friedrich Froebel. Part of Froebel's brilliance was the name he thought up with for his invention. Not a school, but a garden, a child garden or garden of children, a new kind of child-

appropriate place. Froebel and his followers invented a new kind of play-oriented education, too, based on materials and activities and games and fingerplays and songs: wooden blocks, weaving colored threads, games like Duck, Duck, Goose, and Where is Thumbkin, which taught children to take turns and learn through play. So that's where our special, child-oriented curriculum began.

The first kindergartens in the United States were private, taught in German by German immigrants, in the 1840s and 1850s. Soon well-educated women like Elizabeth Peabody heard about the kindergarten and began promoting it, for children, and as a "vocation from on High," a new, socially acceptable career for women, who weren't allowed to be doctors or lawyers or join other professions. Wealthy women began founding kindergarten societies to support charity kindergartens for the poor, like the ones Pauline Agassiz Shaw started in Boston. This time, when Shaw and other influential Bostonians asked the School Committee (which now had women on it who were elected in a local election in which women couldn't vote) to adopt public kindergartens, they did. In 1888, Boston became one of the first cities in the country to offer kindergartens in the public schools; St. Louis was the first; Chicago and New York City followed Boston, both in 1892. Educating five-year-olds, for a half day, was becoming a public responsibility.

I'm going to skip ahead a bit, because the story of how we got public kindergartens throughout the country is long and complicated. It took incredibly hardworking, politically savvy, non-partisan kindergarten advocates, like Bessie Locke, the director of the National Kindergarten Association, to campaign state-by-state and town-by-town, and engage all of the stakeholders they could, governor's wives, and the PTA and church groups, and wealthy businessmen, and politicians, and build coalitions.

Getting public kindergartens was hard, hard, hard work, and didn't happen overnight. Locke wrote model statutes and lobbied state legislatures. When enabling legislation passed in California in 1913, with the help of Kate Douglas Wiggin, the author of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, who had been a charity kindergarten teacher in San Francisco, the campaign for public kindergartens gained momentum. From 1913 to 1919 the National Kindergarten Association funded a Kindergarten Bureau, which Locke directed within the United States Bureau of Education, giving the idea of public kindergartens an aura of federal approval.

But there were many setbacks, when legislatures or governors reneged on promises to support public kindergartens. Again, most of the obstacles were about money. It was expensive to add another year of schooling, and some states, like New Hampshire, still don't require all towns to offer kindergarten. So savvy advocacy and patience and political organizing were also a big part of the story, from the beginning.

Once there were more public kindergartens, there weren't enough well-trained kindergarten teachers. So colleges like Wheelock in Boston, and the National College of Education in Chicago (now National-Louis University), which were founded as a kindergarten training schools, expanded. Wellesley College added a kindergarten course in the early 1900s and Katherine Lee Bates from our English Department, who wrote the words for "America the Beautiful" sponsored a kindergarten in the town of Wellesley. State colleges and schools of education in large universities, like Columbia University's Teachers College, began adding more kindergarten courses. So there were large workforce and quality issues, and it took a long time to meet the demand for well-educated kindergarten teachers, who eventually had Bachelor's degrees and were certified, if they taught in the public schools.

Bear with me. One more historical movement to go: Nursery schools.

The Nursery School Movement

Nursery schools were also imported, from England, where they started in the early 1900s. There were American versions, too, playgroups in settlement houses in New York City. The Bureau of Educational Experiments and its nursery school were founded in Greenwich Village in 1916 and became very influential. As its name suggests, psychologists were involved, and worked with nursery school teachers to gather data on young children's habits, behavior, and development, and provide parent education. Many early nursery schools were founded as places for psychological research. New play materials and curricular ideas were experimented with, which were the origin of what today we call "developmentally appropriate curriculum." Did you know that the famous psychologist Jean Piaget developed his developmental psychology at the nursery school at the Institute Jean Jacques Rousseau in Geneva, and that Harvard gave him an honorary degree as early as 1936?

Some nursery school educators and psychologists saw the nursery school as a grand experiment to prove that preschool education was good for young children. After finding that attending nursery school raised children's IQs, which were thought to be fixed, and helped children with emotional and social problems, along with so-called "normal" children, nursery school educators and psychologists such as George Stoddard, the director of the Iowa Child Welfare Station, declared the experiment to be a grand success.

Nursery schools in the 1920s briefly brought preschool education and child care back together. Some early nursery schools, many of which were on college campuses, were full day programs. Funded by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (John D. Rockefeller's wife was an ardent kindergarten supporter), there were nursery school and child development institutes at major universities around the country. With Rockefeller support, an institute at Smith College, experimented

with coordinating women's work and their children's education (Wellesley had and still has a nursery school, too, and a child care center).

Nursery schools really became child care programs during the long crisis of the Depression and World War II, when the federal government funded Emergency Nursery Schools throughout the country, as job programs for out of work adults. To monitor the quality and workforce problems that arose when inadequately trained people started working with young children, nursery school educators such as Abigail Adams Eliot, who started the Ruggles Street Nursery School and Training Center in Roxbury (where she ran some of the first integrated parent education classes in the country) volunteered doing professional development programs, overseen by the federal Works Progress Administration.

Federally-supported public nursery schools were continued during World War II, as Children's Centers for Rosie the Riveter's children. The Children's Centers, many of which were located near war-related industries, like the Kaiser Shipyards in Portland, Oregon and Oakland, California, provided preschool education and child care 24/7, including health care and healthy hot meals for mothers to pick up at the end of their shifts. Wouldn't that be nice? And some of them were in specially designed, beautiful new buildings. See, if there's a national emergency like a war, we can do it, though I can't resist saying that I don't see us doing that during the war today, though the Armed Services do sponsor some very high quality child care programs

As the war came to a close, nursery educators were hopeful that the federal government would continue supporting preschools and argued that it would be a sound investment. But as Iowa Child Welfare Station director and National Association for Nursery Education (the precursor of the National Association for Young Children- NAEYC) president George Stoddard concluded presciently, the idea was "so beautifully logical" that he feared it would "not be carried out for a long time." Stoddard was right. President Harry Truman cut funding for the Children's Centers in 1946 when the war was over, though a few cities, notably in California, continued to support nursery schools on their own, for low-income children. Not all of the Rosies and their kids went home the way they were supposed to; women's workforce participation continued to grow in the 1950s and 1960s, and child care programs grew.

It took another war, President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty to give us Head Start in 1965. In 1971, we almost got federally-funded universal child care and preschool education with the Mondale-Brademas Comprehensive Child Development Act. The act passed both houses of Congress, but was vetoed by President Nixon, who said that it would "commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child-rearing over against the family-centered approach," implying that universal preschool education and child care were Communist and un-American. Behind the Cold War rhetoric, many say that the real reason was money, again. But yes, we came that close.

Since then, as you know, preschool education and child care have continued to grow, in many different forms, with many different models, with multiple providers, with many of the same quality and workforce issues.

So where does this leave us today?

What can we learn from the history of preschool education?

There have always been multiple providers. Quality is the key and the key to quality is having a well paid, well educated workforce. The main obstacle is money. But if the public can be convinced that it's worth it, and they can be, they'll support it, and vote for it, especially if they see it as a response to an emergency and are convinced that it's a wise investment and good for all children. But it takes politically-adept advocates, like Libby Doggett and Margaret Blood, and you, and support from politicians, like our Governor-Elect Deval Patrick and his wife Diane Patrick, and a lot of hard, hard work. And it takes time, because we want to do it right, because only high quality preschool education produces the added benefits that young children and the country need.

It's been over a 150 years since the first kindergartens were started in America, and we still don't have them for every child, as a full day option. We've had nursery schools for three- and four-year-olds for nearly 100 years. But the progress I've seen in universal preschool education of all kinds in the last ten years, since my book *Preschool Education in America* came out is amazing. I'm not taking credit; you should!

A Commonwealth for Children

I want to end with a quotation from Elizabeth Peabody. A kindergarten, Peabody wrote in 1863, was not an "old-fashioned infant-school," nor "a public primary school." Instead, she said, it was "a commonwealth or republic of children." We need to work together to make Elizabeth Peabody's dream come true, for three- and four- year-olds, to make each of our states a commonwealth for children. We can do this. And while were at it, let's work together to make the United States a better commonwealth for children.

Thank you.