

Investing in Quality Early Childhood Programs Is Not Enough

Tiffany Pyen

As a Teaching Assistant at the East Durham Children's Initiative bilingual preschool, I had the chance to meet amazing children who were sweet, intelligent, funny, and curious. I was interested to see how these children handled complex tasks, like squeezing pipettes to transfer yellow, blue, and red dyed water into different jars. They followed directions well for the most part, and we spoke gently and kindly to them. If they didn't follow directions, we were patient with them.

During snack time, I taught them how to ask a peer for the bowl and use the little thongs instead of grabbing food with their bare hands. When we played outside, I taught them to wait for a turn to go on the swings. When they washed their hands, I monitored how much water came out of the faucet, the temperature of the water, and helped them dispense the soap and paper towels. They were completely dependent, but everyday we pushed them to be as independent as possible. I was sick for a month with something like the common cold, but that is not what I remember. I remember singing songs in Spanish and reading to the children in both English and Spanish. I remember learning great techniques for classroom management, like using a cellphone timer to enforce sharing, and singing the directions ("walking, walking"), as opposed to speaking sternly when they were overly excited and overstepped boundaries.

Although this was a hard job for me because it came with tasks I did not enjoy (wiping down tables, doing the dishes, and vacuuming the floor everyday), I learned a few essential lessons that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. First, I saw how quickly children make connections and learn about the world in which they live. One day, a three-year-old child constructed a gun out of his colorful blocks. He tried hiding it from me when I came by, before I even said anything. I told him we do not shoot people with guns, and tried to redirect him to kill the imaginary birds outside the window (sorry to the animal lovers!). I also suggested making a target poster with concentric circles. All the boys who were fixated on using imaginary guns with their hands came to shoot at the paper target instead. Still, I was still a little shaken at the children's enthusiasm for guns.

Another memory is of a little girl who I saw sulking under the large play structure outside one day. She said that the girl she wanted to play with did not want to play with her, and was playing with another girl instead. I tried to comfort her and explain to her that I thought the other girl was still her friend and just wanted to play with another girl that day. I think it was the first time she felt rejected. I felt important, to have been present to intervene at a moment when a child needed the reassurance of an adult.

I remember how eagerly the children listened to me when I enthusiastically read a book during snack time, because I felt that reading while they ate would be more entertaining than sitting in silence. They paid attention and soaked up the learning.

The children were well-behaved sometimes and not well-behaved other times, just like all children. They are highly capable of becoming great thinkers and contributors to society. We bonded from being together every day. I enjoyed sharing with them my joy for learning, despite the ups and downs each day, like wiping noses for children who didn't know how to do it themselves yet.

One day in the Spring, before the school year ended, I began to think about something. I was walking from the playground on the serene trail up to the school, when a terrible thought came to my mind. The thought was reality, sinking in. "These children are fine now, because we are supporting them with quality resources. They have good toys and a good program. But next year, some of them are going to kindergarten. Who will their kindergarten teachers be? What schools will they attend? Then what middle schools and high schools will they attend? Who will be at these schools, and how will they treat our children when they are teenagers?" The truth is that my children lived in poverty. As much as I tried to ignore this reality, I knew too much about what lay ahead of them in the current political and educational landscape in North Carolina. I tried not to worry about the future, but I sensed an impending doom. Inequality. Their futures were not in my control, as much as I wanted to believe that what we did each day mattered. All I could hope was that there would be people who continued to care for them throughout their lives—to be present. To believe in their goodness and value as human beings.

That is why I want to be informed and active politically and in the community around education. I don't want to forget about what I saw. What I saw was innocence. What I saw was potential. But what I sensed was danger. We need to leverage funding and advocate for better policies that will help these students access higher educational and career opportunities, so they can have sustainable livelihoods. What we need is not just higher quality early education programs, although that is vital. We need a sustenance of quality from every sector and from every direction, starting with the public schools where these children will continue to spend the majority of their youth. I don't think it's too late for my kids, but every second matters and every day is a day when another three-year-old boy might be making a toy gun out of his blocks, with or without adult supervision, when he doesn't yet know his alphabet. These children will strive and flourish if we support them with the right resources.

Tiffany Pyen recently graduated from the Duke Sanford School of Public Policy with a Master of Public Policy. She moved to Durham, NC in 2013 to teach high school French at Southern School of Energy and Sustainability. She is also a member of the Durham People's Alliance Education Team.