

**“Excellence and Equity of Care and
Education for Children and Families Part 1”
Program Transcript**

FEMALE SPEAKER: Ms. Vasquez, welcome and thank you so much for joining us. This is the first in a series of three conversations about issues related to equity and excellence in early childhood care and education, and the focus of our conversation today will be on three major issues. One, the prescribed standards in the early childhood environments. And two, the issue of school readiness. And three, the question of achievement gaps.

To begin with, would you please address these three issues of standard school readiness and achievement gaps as you see them affect young children, their families, and the various early childhood environments?

MS. VASQUEZ: Let's start with standards. The good thing about standards is that it sets the pattern, or at least it puts a goal in front of educators, as to where we want children to be and what we want them to acquire through their experiences in early childhood education programs. On the downside, it doesn't take account where the children are coming from, and how much do they know before they enter the preschool programs, and how much they have learned. It only tells you what they need to have, but it doesn't take into account the whole child as we are used to in our field.

In terms of school readiness, I don't know that that's a new era for early childhood education. It's something that we have been working on from when I entered this profession. It's always been our job, and it's something that we have always concentrated on.

So this whole topic or the whole conversation about school readiness has taken a turn, and I'm not sure that it is for the benefit of our children. The focus is now on academics, which again was something that we always worked on. We looked at it holistically, and now we have this side track conversation that is focusing on the academics.

And then in terms of achievement gaps, the whole reason for Head Start in the US has been to address the issue of achievement gaps. It's not new either. It's not something that we invented or discovered in our generation. It's always been there.

Around the world, there are discrepancies and there are differences in how families live, how they survive, what resources they have available to themselves. I'm not sure that it's an issue of education as much as a social issue, something that we need to take a look at beyond what we do in the preschool classroom. So they are intertwined. They're not so independent of each other, but they're not new topics either.

FEMALE SPEAKER: In the current early childhood literature, researchers as well as practitioners are starting to voice concerns about the changing face of kindergarten, which seems to resemble more and more a grade school environment. What are your thoughts on that?

MS. VASQUEZ: Well, unfortunately it has a trickling effect, and it's true we have this pressure now that children need to know-- as if we could measure knowledge in pounds-- that they need to know a certain amount of whatever.

FEMALE SPEAKER: That's a very interesting metaphor.

MS. VASQUEZ: And I don't know that we can measure it that way. Human beings, from the beginning of time, we have grown and developed through adaptation, which means we progress, we regress, we make more gains. And so, it's not a straight line going in any one direction, and it's concerning to me. I see how much pressure it puts on teachers having to drill children, as if memorizing the ABCs was more important than having an activity where a relationship is built and we teach children about understanding and communication.

So it has a twist to it that I'm not sure it's all that healthy. It puts a lot of pressure on teachers, both in kindergarten and the preschool environment. And it puts a lot of pressure on parents who are not early childhood educators, who do not have child development background, who now think that by bringing the child into a preschool program, it's going to be the solution to all of the educational needs and problems.

FEMALE SPEAKER: When it comes to assessing young children in this new environment that focuses so much on academics, what do you perceive as challenges for all involved, the children, the teachers, the parents?

MS. VASQUEZ: Again, assessment is not something new to what we do in early childhood education. We have always been observing to see if whatever we presented was a good fit for the children. Unfortunately, we're taking it a step beyond, sacrificing best practices, forgetting what we know about not just child development, but human development.

This whole idea of I practice-- I learn, I've acquired, I need to rehearse, I need to practice it again-- that is not the nature of learning. We are taking that away from children, and we test them. Oh, they know it. We need to move on to the next thing. That's not how we scaffold learning in the preschool environment. That's not the purpose of what we need to do.

So, it is important that we do assessments. It's at the essence of all the planning and everything that happens in the early childhood environments, but it's not to the means of getting children ready academically exclusively. It's part of the bigger picture.

FEMALE SPEAKER: In what ways do this demands for standards and stricter academic assessment in school readiness affect the idea of viewing young children in a holistic way, one where support for intellectual maturation as well as social-emotional maturation are perceived as equally important to the well being of children?

MS. VASQUEZ: I think what we do or what is going to happen to the children of today-- and we'll find out later on-- that we're going to create bigger gaps than we already have. And later on, we'll be talking about, oh, we didn't do a good job in social development with the children. How do we remediate that?

And so, if we were to take a look at that, we would pause and see what is it that we're doing and how is it that we're going to contribute to resolve this issue of gaps in what children need to prepare for kindergarten without sacrificing what we know is healthy, what we know we need to do? The social skills, if those seeds are not planted early on, we sacrifice too much. We don't give children the tools that they need to cope, to survive, to communicate, to ask for help, to maneuver everything else that we put in front of them through the K-12 system and beyond.

So it's concerning, and we do need to figure out how is that as early childhood educators articulate these needs and put forth the knowledge that we have about early childhood education, not allowing or stopping others to speak out for us. I think that what is important that I keep at heart, and what I keep communicating to other colleagues and upcoming professionals and paraprofessionals, is that we have to remember when we enter this profession, we enter into the commitment of working with children. They're not empty cups. They're not objects. We're not coming to fix them. We're working with them. So we need to get to know them, we need to build relationships, and we need to do what is right for them.