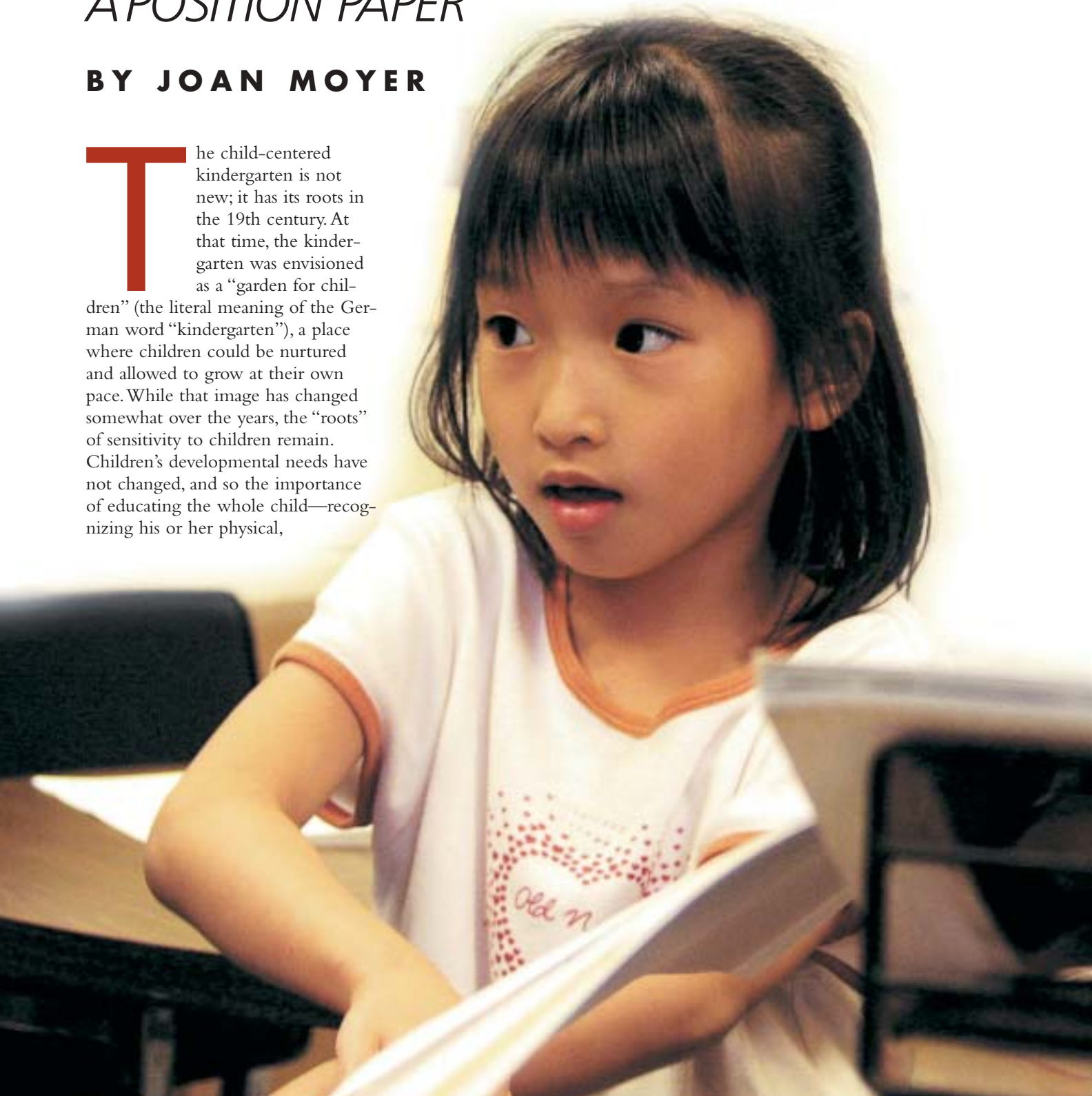


The Child-Centered Kindergarten*

A POSITION PAPER

BY JOAN MOYER

The child-centered kindergarten is not new; it has its roots in the 19th century. At that time, the kindergarten was envisioned as a “garden for children” (the literal meaning of the German word “kindergarten”), a place where children could be nurtured and allowed to grow at their own pace. While that image has changed somewhat over the years, the “roots” of sensitivity to children remain. Children’s developmental needs have not changed, and so the importance of educating the whole child—recognizing his or her physical,





social/emotional, and intellectual growth and development—remains. A change in the kindergarten curriculum, however, was brought about by: (1) societal pressure, (2) misunderstandings about how children learn, (3) aggressive marketing of commercial materials largely inappropriate for kindergarten-age children, (4) a shortage of teachers specifically prepared to work with young children, and (5) the reassignment of trained teachers in areas of declining enrollment.

Since its beginning more than 100 years ago as a professional organization, the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) has emphasized the importance of the kindergarten years in a child's development. The official position of ACEI concerning kindergarten states: *The Association for Childhood Education International recognizes the importance of kindergarten education and supports high-*

quality kindergarten programs that provide developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate experiences for children (Moyer, Egertson, & Isenberg, 1987).

Purpose of Kindergarten

Many of the earliest kindergartens in the United States served the purpose of easing the acculturation of newly arrived immigrant children. Later, the purpose became easing the child's transition from home to the more formal aspects of the elementary school. For some children, the transition purpose continues to be important. The vast majority of children today, however, have experience at preschool and/or childcare settings before they attend kindergarten.

Nevertheless, many people in and out of education continue to perceive the kindergarten as the initial group experience for children (National Center on Education Statistics, 1984, p. 43).

Unfortunately, many parents and elementary educators do not view experiences in child care or other prekindergarten programs as "real learning." Spodek (1999) reported that many of the programs have shifted their emphasis from spurring kindergartners' development to highlighting specific learning goals. While programs vary in quality (as they do in elementary and secondary schools), children of any age are learning in every waking moment. Education provided for children at any level simply serves to organize their learning into more well-defined paths, governed by the philosophical orientation of program planners and the quality of the program. Although broad variations in children's abilities are evident, all children can learn. Noddings (1992) reminds teachers not to expect all children to bring similar strengths and abilities to the classroom. These variations in abili-

ties, coupled with children's varying ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels, add interest, joy, and challenge to the kindergarten program.

The work of such developmental theorists as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky serves as a foundation for kindergarten practices. The theoretical background is expressed through the integrated curriculum, which also best accommodates the variations in children's understanding of the world around them. Early childhood professionals at all levels are concerned about the methods and content in the majority of kindergarten programs. Despite societal changes, kindergarten remains a place where children need a quality program in order to achieve their full potential.

Program Goals

The need for flexibility in planning programs that serve children and their families is well-documented. Parents need options so that the services they select for their children can meet family needs, as well as the needs of each child. Some parents, however, have misconceptions about the goals of the kindergarten program and, as a result, they focus on such cursory academic skills as counting and reciting the alphabet (Simmons & Brewer, 1985). Many people feel comfortable emphasizing such learning because it is easily measured. Elkind (1996) warns, however, that pushing children into academic areas too soon has a negative effect on learning, and refers to this practice as the "miseducation" of young children.

According to Katz (1985), early childhood educators need to consider children's dispositions, which she defines as "characteristic ways of responding to categories of experience across types of situations. Examples include curiosity, humor, creativity, affability, and quarrelsomeness. . . . Dispositions are not likely to be acquired through workbook exercises, lessons, or direct instruction" (p. 1).

Some parents, concerned over the

demanding nature of the kindergarten curriculum, delay their children's kindergarten entrance. This practice has tended to institutionalize the more demanding and narrowly academic curriculum (Walsh, 1989). While 6-year-olds may be more capable of accomplishing the curricular goals, such programs try to "fit" children to the curriculum, rather than adjusting the curriculum to respond to the nature of the learner. Thus, younger children are more likely to fail.

The activity/experience-centered environment, which is essential if young children are to reach their maximum potential, provides for a far richer and more stimulating environment than one dominated by pencil-and-paper, teacher-directed tasks. A well-designed kindergarten program capitalizes on the interest some children may show in learning academic skills. At the same time, it does not have that same expectation for all children; nor does it use up precious time to inculcate skills and knowledge for which children have no immediate use or real understanding. Learning to learn should be the emphasis in the early years (Bloom, 1981).

Program Content

Kindergarten programs must be related to the needs and capacities of the children enrolled in them. In spite of major sociological and technological changes, developmental rates have not accelerated, nor are children more intelligent than they used to be (Elkind, 1986). Only the variety and intensity of early experiences have changed. Most kindergarten children are only 5 years old, and they have the basic needs of this age group, whether or not they have attended preschool or know how to read (Webster, 1984). Young children still need supportive environments, rich in direct experiences that are meaningful to them (Nebraska State Department of Education, 1984).

A high-quality kindergarten program provides a strong foundation

upon which children can build the skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward schooling necessary for lifelong learning.

Program Implementation

An effective, individually and culturally developmentally appropriate kindergarten program:

- Recognizes and accepts individual differences in children's growth patterns and rates by setting realistic curriculum goals that are appropriate to their developmental levels.
- Educates the whole child—with attention to his or her physical, social/emotional, and intellectual developmental needs and interests.
- Responds to the needs of children as developing, thinking individuals by focusing on the process of learning rather than on disparate skills, content, and products.
- Provides multiple opportunities for learning with concrete, manipulative materials that: (1) are relevant to children's experiential background; and (2) keep them actively engaged in learning and discovering through use of all the senses, leading to more input upon which thought is constructed.
- Provides a variety of activities and materials by incorporating: (1) learning activities that encourage active participation through "hands-on" activity, communication, and dialogue; (2) large blocks of time to pursue interests; (3) time to ask questions and receive answers that develop concepts and ideas for use at varying levels of difficulty and complexity; and (4) time to *reflect upon* and abstract information when encountering viewpoints that are different from one's peers.
- Views play as fundamental to children's learning, growth, and development, enabling them to develop and clarify concepts, roles, and ideas by testing and evaluating them through the use of open-ended materials and role-enactment. Play further enables children to develop fine and gross motor skills, to learn to share with others, to learn to see others'



points of view, and to be in control of their thoughts and feelings.

- Provides many opportunities for the use of multicultural and nonsexist experiences, materials, and equipment that enhance children's acceptance of self and others; these experiences enable children to accept differences and similarities among people, including those who are challenged in some way.

- Embraces the teaching of all content areas, especially when they are presented as integrated experiences that develop and extend concepts, strengthen skills, and provide a solid foundation for learning in language, literacy, math, science, social studies, health, art, and music and movement.

- Allows children to make choices and decisions within the limits of the materials provided, resulting in increased independence, attention, joy in learning, and the feelings of success necessary for growth and development.

- Utilizes appropriate assessment

procedures, such as observation techniques and portfolios, to measure learning for all kindergarten children.

Play Is Essential

The pressure for academic achievement, coupled with the mistaken idea that today's children have outgrown the need to play, have led to increased emphasis on "basic skills" in kindergarten. The principal source of development in the early years is play (Vygotsky, 1976); in fact, Catron and Allen (1999) state that the optimal development of young children is made possible through play. When viewed as a learning process, play becomes a vehicle for intellectual growth, and it continues to be the most vital avenue of learning for kindergartners. In contrast, research indicates that academic gains from non-play approaches are not lasting (Schweinhart & Weikert, 1996). Play involves not only use of materials and equipment, but also words and ideas that promote literacy and develop thinking skills. Consequently, in addition

to the three R's, play also promotes problem-solving, critical thinking, concept formation, and creativity skills. Social and emotional development also are enhanced through play. Play fosters wholistic learning (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997). "Children integrate everything they know in all domains when they play" (Almy, 2000, p. 10). The classic words of Lawrence Frank (1964) remain as meaningful as ever today:

"A conception of play that recognizes the significance of autonomous, self-directed learning and active exploration and manipulation of the actual world gives a promising approach to the wholesome development of children. . . . It is a way to translate into the education of children our long-cherished, enduring goal values, a belief in the worth of the individual personalities, and a genuine respect for the dignity and integrity of the child" (p. 73).

Suransky (1983) warns that "eroding the play life of early childhood has severe implications for the chil-

dren we attempt to 'school' in later years" (p. 29). Froebel believed that in free play children reveal their future minds (cited in Bruce, 1993). It is important to emphasize that critics of the current practice of emphasizing academic work over free play are not advocating an environment that makes fewer demands on children. Almy, Monighan, Scales, and Van Hoorn (1984) state, "Teachers who, drawing on recent research and their own classroom research, justify an important place for play in the early childhood curriculum will not lose sight of their responsibility as instructors. . . . Teachers have responsibility . . . for providing the play opportunities in which children can consolidate and make personally meaningful the experiences they have had" (p. 22).

Kindergarten teachers agree with researchers and experts who contend that child-centered activities that provide cognitive challenges, and also facilitate the development of autonomy and social skills, are essential for young children (Spidell Rusher, McGrevin, & Lambiotte, 1992). Wardle (1999, p. 7) writes ". . . as we [have] seen many of our public funded early childhood programs become downward extensions of public schools, we need to advocate for the children's right to play."

Appropriate Physical Environment

Kindergarten children are active, curious learners who need adequate space, a variety of materials, and large blocks of time in which to try out their ideas. Attention to the arrangement of physical facilities is an integral part of their educational experience. How teachers arrange kindergarten classrooms affects children's interests, level of interaction and involvement, initiative development, skill development, and overall attitude toward schooling and learning. A classroom arrangement that supports learning gives attention to the organization and use of space, the arrangement of materials, and the role of both adults and children in the learning environment.

How space is organized and used influences how comfortable children feel and how they work, contributing to a challenging and satisfactory learning environment. Because children's activity patterns change as they gain new skills and mature, and because spatial organization influences other behaviors, the physical facilities must be flexible enough to change to accommodate the children.

Similarly, the arrangement of learning materials determines their level and use. How well materials are arranged also affects the ideas and connections children can make with the materials.

Although children and teachers occupy the same physical space, their perceptions and use of that space are not the same. Kindergarten teachers must arrange the space from the *kindergartner's* point of view and perspective. In order to build a sense of community, kindergarten classrooms should reflect the children, individually and as a group, as well as the teacher.

The following environmental principles address spatial organization, use of materials, and the role of adults in the kindergarten:

- Rooms should be arranged to accommodate individual, small group, and large group activities.
- Interest areas should be clearly defined; differ in size, shape, and location; and attend to traffic patterns while permitting continuity of activity and reducing distractibility. All spaces should be clearly visible to the teacher.
- Rooms should be arranged to facilitate the activity and movements of children at work by attending to available paths for their use and minimizing the amount of interference.
- Learning materials should be arranged and displayed so that they are inviting to children and suggest multiple possibilities for use; they should be clearly visible and accessible, enabling children to return and replace materials as easily as they can get them. Clear, well-organized materials facilitate children's ability to use

and explore them.

- Materials should be changed and combined to increase levels of complexity, thus helping children become more self-directed and increasing their level of involvement.

- Children perceive space they can see, reach, and touch. Teachers can support, stimulate, and maintain children's involvement in learning by providing a variety of raw materials for exploration, tools for manipulation, containers for storage and displays, adequate work spaces, inviting displays at eye level, and appropriate sources of information within the children's reach.

Textbooks and Materials

Considerable discussion in the educational and popular media has focused on the quality of textbooks used in schools. The concerns of early childhood educators, however, appear to have been overlooked in this discussion. Many kindergarten teachers are expected to use commercial texts that present information and activities that are developmentally inappropriate. These materials also may be culturally inappropriate. Many "how to" books for teachers are simply collections of reproducible worksheets that result in a pencil/paper curriculum. Such practices do not reflect what we know about how young children learn. Today's kindergarten programs must reflect developmentally appropriate practices that promote active learning, and should match goals and content to the child's level of understanding (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2000).

The introduction of technology into kindergarten classrooms, while promising (and becoming more common), still requires the teacher to determine appropriate uses of that technology. "Used appropriately, technology can enhance children's cognitive and social abilities" (National Association for the Education for Young Children, 1996, p. 12). Elkind (1996) cautions: "The danger is that the young child's proficiency with the computer may tempt us to



ignore what we know about cognitive development. . . . If we rate a child's intellectual competence by his or her performance on a computer, then we will have lost what we have been working so hard to attain—a broad appreciation of developmentally appropriate practice" (p. 23).

Teachers for Kindergartens

Aside from parents, teachers frequently are the most significant adults in young children's lives. Therefore, quality kindergarten programs must be staffed by caring teachers who have faith in every child's potential to achieve and succeed.

Assigning primary and upper elementary teachers to the kindergarten is a questionable practice—indeed, it is cause for great concern. Many of these teachers have limited under-

standing of appropriate programs for 5-year-olds, and so they operate under the false assumption that young children learn in the same way that older children do (Association for Childhood Education International et al., 1986). Consequently, they use a "watered-down" primary curriculum, replete with workbooks, textbooks, and one-dimensional tasks that can be readily evaluated.

ACEI advocates developmentally appropriate kindergartens staffed with early childhood teachers who:

- Are knowledgeable in child development, committed to children, and able to plan a curriculum that will promote the full development of each child—enabling teachers to have a profound influence on children's lives.
- Listen thoughtfully to children,

extend children's language about ideas and feelings, ask questions that encourage insights and highlight contradictions, and promote and value creative, divergent responses from all children.

- Regularly assess children's interests, needs, and skill levels—enabling them to plan continuous, flexible, and realistic activities for each child.
- Design learning environments that provide for successful daily experiences by matching activities to each child's developmental level, and by using positive interactions, encouragement, and praise for children's efforts.
- Promote a positive self-image by helping children succeed in a variety of activities and experiences, and by providing techniques to help children establish their own limits. Children's

self-esteem affects what they do, say, and think.

- Utilize a variety of instructional approaches, including individual, small group, large group, role-enactment activities, and activity centers—all suited to kindergartners' wide range of ability, interests, and needs.

- Provide varied experiences about which kindergarten children can communicate by: (1) encouraging them to use their own experiences as a basis for developing language activities through individual and small group interactions with peers and adults; (2) arranging for periodic change of materials, equipment, and activities in the environment; and (3) providing experiences for children to use their senses as they interact with people and materials.

Such teachers provide effective interaction with children, as well as encouragement, support, and guidance.

Program Support

Parental involvement is essential if they are to understand the purpose of kindergarten education, assist in achieving kindergarten goals and reinforce those lessons in the home setting. Parents who are unable to participate directly in the classroom can contribute in myriad other ways (Barbour & Barbour, 2000; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997). Parents can show their support for their children's learning by volunteering in the classroom, exchanging information with teachers, acting as chaperones on field trips, helping with homework, reading to children, discussing the school day with the kindergarten child, informing teachers about home situations that may affect the child's behavior at school, and paying attention to materials sent home. Parents must advocate for child-centered kindergarten programs for their children, in part by informing administrators and school boards of their eagerness to support these programs. Teachers, administrators, and parents must work together as advocates for child-centered kindergarten programs.

Central administrators, supervi-

sors, and building principals who oversee the kindergarten program also must be educated about the developmental needs of kindergarten children and the unique needs of the kindergarten program. As Spidell Rusher, McGrevin, and Lambiotte (1992) state, "Communication among teachers, principals, policymakers, experts in childhood education, and parents is vital" (p. 294). With this knowledge, they can provide the administrative support essential to the success of the kindergarten program, value its uniqueness, and interpret it to the community professionally and with integrity. Elkind (1986) cautions

that "the risks of miseducating children are both short- and long-term. In each case, the potential psychological risks of early intervention far outweigh any potential educational gain" (p. 634).

ACEI advocates child-centered kindergarten programs that encourage active experiential learning, are developmentally appropriate, increase independence, and promote joy in learning—staffed by teachers who are professionally prepared to work with young children.

As Lewis (2000) writes, "Perhaps what is needed are super programs that provide balance, giving every



child a chance to succeed and to play" (p. 564). ✍

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Guest Editorial

Continued from page 3

Such situations offer an evangelistic opportunity and a means for channeling children into the church's elementary schools.

One journal issue is wholly inadequate to cover the topic of early childhood development. Limited space does not allow us to cover a number of relevant topics. However, the JOURNAL welcomes reader responses to the articles and invites the submission of additional manuscripts.

Readers wishing to read more about this topic can refer to sources listed at the end of many of the articles or search the CIRCLE Website for additional resources: <http://circle.adventist.org/>.—Linda Bryant Cavinness.

The coordinator for this special issue on early childhood education, **Linda Bryant Cavinness, Ph.D.**, is Associate Professor of Education at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. Her areas of specialization are Language and Literacy and Educational Neuroscience. The editors express their appreciation for her dedication, enthusiasm, assistance, and attention to detail in soliciting articles and producing the issue.