

Grantee Spotlight

In this section, we feature interviews with some of our grantee organizations' directors and key staff members, who share their thoughts on their work and the particular fields they're involved in.

Classical Pianist Becomes Early Childhood Expert



Dr. Hiro Yoshikawa is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and one of the lead designers (along with Rick Weissbourd) of the PK-3 institutes at the HGSE that receive funding from the Foundation. Hiro received his BA from Yale, his master's (in piano) at Juilliard, and his master's and doctorate in psychology at NYU. He is a developmental and community psychologist who conducts research on the development of young children in the US, China, Chile, Mexico, and most recently, Cambodia. We caught up with Hiro as he returned from a trip to Cambodia.

You have studied early childhood systems in other countries; which countries are you most familiar with, and what can you tell us about how they think about early childhood?

I am most familiar with Mexico, Chile and now Cambodia. Each has its challenges, and each country is struggling with the quality issue. I consulted on the 2008 UNICEF Report Card on Early Childhood, and we looked at a variety of dimensions for ECE: the national plan for early childhood, levels of enrollment, subsidized access, basic training for staff, infant health. Across industrialized nations, the Scandinavian countries and France come out on top, and the US, Canada, Ireland and Australia came out on the bottom on this set of indicators. Some countries that have higher levels of poverty than the US are looking better. Mexico has a higher enrollment rate in preschool, for example, than the US; enrollment rates are a question of government choice and investment. Mexico made preschool mandatory for all 4- and 5-year old children. In these developing countries, preschool is a relatively new phenomenon; basic education has not been defined as including preschool. It is interesting, though, in Mexico there is a program called CONAFE, which provides incentives for rural villages. If a village actually builds a preschool shelter, the government will send a teacher on a government scholarship and provide training and materials.

Is there a cultural difference in the way countries view children, vs. the US?

I have studied immigrant families from China, Mexico and the Dominican Republic who are living in New York City, and they all want the same things for their children that American-born parents do: they value their children's learning and want them to be successful in school. There is a difference in the goals for social and emotional behavior; there is more of an emphasis on obedience and respect for parents and adults in some ethnic and immigrant groups than others.

Are other countries linking the education of children from three to third grade?

Not much has been done in the age-three to third-grade span in the countries I have studied, and there is not much that is systematic. It is viewed as important by the international early childhood community -- a critical next challenge in early childhood programs and policy. And there is a huge variety in the way that preschool is funded. In some countries it is the government, in some it is international NGOs (non-governmental organizations), in some it is a combination of government, NGOs and private. And, like the US, when preschools are part of primary school, there is more equity in terms of salaries for teachers.

How are other countries assessing children's progress?

In most countries the major marker is the number of children enrolled in preschool, and of course, that only gets you so far. There is not a lot of data on how the children are doing. There are some small scale evaluations that link attendance to learning, and children's health, but for policymakers, the emphasis is on enrollment. There are some efforts now in implementing national and international child development indicators, like the Early Development Inventory and cross-national studies like the UNICEF MICS studies.

In terms of the HGSE PK-3 Institutes, what attracted you to work on this project with Rick?

The reality that preschool by itself is not enough. By itself, preschool will not have stupendous, life-long effects. And I like the notion of disseminating the evidence about policy and practice to states and school districts. There is no better collaborator for this work than Rick, who has such a keen understanding of the policy and practice applications at the preschool and elementary school levels.

What do people most need to understand about making the connection between preschool and primary school?

They need to understand that children's learning is on a trajectory that spans birth to adulthood. If we want them to grow into productive citizens, then there need to be sustained, enriched learning environments for all children. Policy makers and business leaders don't understand how much children are learning in those early years – not just playing – and the importance of linking learning experiences throughout their young lives.

As you assess the work you see school districts taking on, what are the biggest impediments to crafting a three to third grade initiative?

Often people are working at a particular point in a system without a chance to work together. There needs to be regular, collaborative work to build a PK-3 system, and that is tough for some school districts to sustain. People need to be planning for improving instruction, quality supports for social and emotional development, and family engagement, across this entire set of grades; those are the hallmarks of a successful three to third grade program.

What are your summer reading plans?

Right now, I am immersed in the Stieg Larsson books ("The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," "The Girl Who Played with Fire," "The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest"); they are a unique blend of feminism, journalistic know-how and financial acumen, as well as your usual trashy thriller elements. They certainly ease the pain of long plane flights.