

A VOICE FOR QUALITY

Will Parnell, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor, Portland State University, Graduate School of Education
Pedagogical Director, Helen Gordon Child Development Center



ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

Name of center

Helen Gordon Child Development Center

Name of host organization

Portland State University

Year opened

1928 as Fruit and Flower Mission; 1976 as Helen Gordon Child Development Center

Populations served

Students, faculty, staff and community members are eligible to enroll in the program. The priority is 2/3 student family population and 1/3 faculty and staff. Community members are enrolled only if there is availability within the faculty and staff allotment.

Number of children enrolled at last count

200

Number of children on waiting list at last count:

750

Operating philosophy

The Helen Gordon Center serves a dual role within the university. It serves students, faculty and staff by providing a high-quality on-campus child care program and additionally, it serves as an academic laboratory resource, inviting participation by faculty and students in the fields of early childhood education, child and family studies, psychology and related fields.

Favorite design feature

I have many favorites. One particular favorite design feature is the connector space between the renovated historic building and the recent addition. We call the main floor a central piazza, named after the Italian concept of the community square, where gatherings lead to relationships, learning, collaboration on projects and so forth. The second floor is a corridor balcony space, where we've created a reuse repository for rescued and repurposed materials utilized in children's educational experiences, creative expression and representational thinking.

Capital funding sources

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why does Portland State University provide early care and education services and who is eligible for these services?

Portland State University has had a long-standing tradition of and value for supporting non-traditional students, some of whom have need for child and family care services. PSU's student body believes in strong student support services and family-work-life-school sustainability for faculty, staff and students.

Being administratively housed under the Graduate School of Education demonstrates the responsible and strategic planning of the early childhood educational services being offered comprehensively across our campus. As an umbrella of services, support, laboratory offerings, and education, the Child Development and Family Services (CDFS) organization is growing and organizing comprehensive education and care for campus and community families through Student Parent Services, the Helen Gordon Child Development Center and the Children's Center. (See www.cdfs.pdx.edu for complete data.)

PSU students, faculty, staff and community-at-large are eligible to utilize the services of our program, ranging from school-day child care services to laboratory, observational and project activities.

2. In what ways were stakeholders involved in the design and development processes for your center?

The CDFS directors and coordinators have always been invited to the planning and implementation processes of anything related to campus programming for young children. The CDFS advisory committee is charged with convening roundtables, brainstorming, or inclusion by students, faculty and staff into any strategic or development plans related to growth in child development and family services on campus. Our recent expansion and renovation of the Helen Gordon Center demonstrated the comprehensive levels of involvement by stakeholders, ranging from early childhood education students and faculty sitting alongside of facilities and planning staff to hire architects. Additionally, the directors, lab-school teachers and students attended to weekly meetings to plan and execute the design and construction of our expansion and renovation. This process was completed in the spirit of collaboration with PSU facilities and planning staff, LCG Construction, GBD Architects, and many other stakeholders and community participants throughout the life of the projects. At various important junctures, the community was invited to give input, look at and support the project plans, attend hard-hat tours, and so forth. A collaborative and open process is essential to the way PSU's CDFS conducts its business, considers growth and executes development.

3. The working title of this piece – “What Money Can Buy” – suggests that money is necessary for a high-quality early education? How do you respond?

My first reaction is one of shock. While it is important that early childhood education receives ongoing monetary support to move away from our current state of inequity, privatized education, and limited access to high-quality early education experiences, money didn't create what we have in PSU's early childhood education programs. Money has propped up important ways of thinking, it has allowed access and additional spaces for families who need schooling for young children, and it has opened doors for expansion of quality practices. However, in my opinion, the most important factor in early education is time, consideration, and a generative model where collaboration, documentation and reflection are essential ingredients to successful programming.

4. What evidence is available to back up claims that learning environments matter for infants, toddlers and preschoolers?

There are many books and research articles written about the learning environment, including an article I co-authored with Dr. Sheryl Reinisch. (See links below.)

5. Explain the importance of facility design in your program. Please give examples of how your facility *facilitates* learning.

Dr. Reinisch and I addressed this in an article published in 2006. Symbiotic relationships change how groups and how individuals work together — causing a powerful connection between individuals and the spaces that they occupy.

Architects and authors of a book about Reggio Emilia, Giulio Ceppi and Michele Zini, describe facility design as not a question of styles. “A relational space is an environment fabric rich in information, without formal rules. It is not the representation of a school, but a whole made up of many different identities, with a recognizable feel about it, in harmony with a set of values and references that guide each choice and line of research. In this space, the aesthetic quality depends (also) on the quality of the connections.”

Aesthetic qualities, those features in the environment that are perceived through the senses, play an important role in learning spaces. Attention given to lighting, color, textures, sounds, items from nature, and children's representative work is critical, because these features touch the senses and ignite wonder and intrigue. Yet aesthetic qualities alone are not enough; rather, it is human relationships in harmony with the aesthetic qualities that make the difference. There are many beautiful spaces filled with aesthetic appeal that still feel cold and empty; they are lacking the relationship factor. Aesthetic qualities woven with experiential relationships create a powerful, magnetic force activated within the learning environment — a fluidization.

When we talk about relational space we mean an integrated space in which the qualities are not strictly aesthetic but are more closely related to “performance” features. This means that the space is not composed of functional zones but of the fluidization of functional zones. In the relational space, the predominant feature is that of the relationships it enables, the many specialized activities that can be carried out there, and the information and cultural filters that can be activated within the space.

6. What is your understanding of the situation in Oregon when it comes to access to high-quality early education programs?

Oregon doesn't have universal pre-primary school education, and what exists is mostly privately funded. Oregon's early childhood education arena is state licensed, asking for minimum regulations and qualifications to educate young children in group educational settings. The National Academy and National Association for the Education of Young Children has a complicated and expensive accreditation process which ensures certain standards for care and education. However, the accreditation process is not mandatory and only 31 programs in Oregon have elected to follow the process.

Multnomah County has over 90,000 children under the age of 5. The county has only 15,000 slots available in schools for young children under the age of 5 and these educational programs are private except for 1,900 publicly funded Early Head Start and Head Start slots. These numbers show the bleak situation we are encountering in Oregon as it relates to support for early education.

7. Make your best case for why Oregon should do more to increase access to high-quality early care and education programs. How can this be achieved?

This makes me question how much we spend on later-life programs for adults who are not faring well in society, such as on rehabilitation programs, jail systems, and the like. I also wonder if we invested in schools for young children, where access and equity could provide quality and sustainable ways of living, such as eating well, developing relationships, and learning in comfortable environments that support teaching and learning, would we create a sustainable loop where later-life programs would require less resources and no longer be essential to our society's endurance?

8. Many individuals and organizations look to your program as a model of what is possible, perhaps even as a model of what should be available to every child. Where do you look for inspiration?

We look within our own community to the early childhood education degree programs, such as PSU's Curriculum and Instruction Early Childhood Education Specialization. We find inspiration in community collaboration organizations such as Portland Children and the Reggio Inspiration Network. We also look nationally at many other schools seeking to share their experiences. Mainly, we look to Reggio Emilia, Italy's municipal pre-primary school system, supported by a city tax and a conglomeration of educators, parents, community

businesses, and a culture of recognizing and valuing young children for their impact on and role in society.

Suggested resources:

www.designshare.com/index.php/articles/hundred-1.

Ceppi, G. & Zini, M. (Eds.) (1998), *Children, spaces, relations: Metaproject for an environment for young children*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

Curtis, D., Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning: Transforming early childhood environments*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. Davis, S. M. (2004). *Environments for sale: Early childhood teacher education in the era of consumerism*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators, Anaheim, CA.

Hathaway, W. E. (1982). *Lights, windows, color: Elements of the school environment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Educational Facility Planners, International. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED226423)

Isbell, R., & Exelby, B. (2001). *Early learning environments that work*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Reinisch, S. J. (2006). *Children's perceptions of the learning environment and aesthetic qualities within their classroom*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Reggio Children (Eds.). (1996). *Catalogue of the exhibit the hundred languages of children*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

Tarr, P. (2001). Aesthetics codes in early childhood classrooms: What art educators can learn from Reggio Emilia. *Art Education* 54 (3), 33-39. Retrieved April 4, 2005, from www.designshare.com/Research/Tarr/Aesthetic_Codes_1.htm.