

Visit to UNH Child Study and Development Center Nov. 30, 2018

report by Jane vanB posted 1/9/19

As part of the LWV study of education issues in NH, a subgroup of the Kearsarge/Sunapee committee has been investigating the current status of public Pre Kindergarten programs in NH. NH is one of only six states nationwide that has not made any effort to implement a universal program for three- and four-year-olds. Maine, Vermont and Massachusetts have already begun to implement Pre-K.

We wanted to visit the UNH Child Study and Development Center because of its reputation for high quality early education and the expertise and interest of the UNH faculty in all aspects of early care and education. They are involved in providing both child care (which is not our focus) and Pre-K and kindergarten, which is our primary interest.

Six LWV members--Jane VanBremen, Carol Kinzler, Dorene Lengyel, Janet Ward, Libby Vesilind and Judith Rystar--visited the UNH Child Study and Development Center in Durham. We observed the classrooms and discussed the center with Lisa Ranfos, Asst. Professor at UNH and the director of the center and Jessica Carver, who is the manager of the center.

The Child Study and Development Center (CSDC) is a laboratory learning environment affiliated with the Human Development and Family Studies department at UNH. The mission of the CSDC is early education, pre-service teaching, and research and outreach. The center will celebrate its 90th birthday this coming January. The CSDC is licensed by the state of NH and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (NAEYC is a national organization with affiliates in every state that seeks to ensure that the early childhood profession exemplifies excellence. They accredit programs, set standards and advocate for policy initiatives).

The center operates both full-time and part-time programs. They offer a full-time program for children from six weeks through kindergarten (Infant Program; Toddler Program; Preschool 1; Preschool 2 and kindergarten classrooms). The full-time program is open to children of full-time students, faculty and staff, and when spaces are available, community families. The Nursery School is a part-day program with open admissions for children ranging from two to four years of age: Nursery 1; Nursery 2 and Nursery 3 classrooms. There is a sliding scale for payment, although most of the children come from middle-class families.

Lisa explained the staff structure of the center. In addition to permanent teachers in each classroom who lead the classrooms and also supervise student teachers, there are also UNH students who work as assistant teachers. UNH students enrolled in the Human Development and Family Studies department participate in two practicums as part of their coursework. UNH students from other disciplines may also spend time as observers at the center. The enrollment in the early childhood major at UNH is robust. We were somewhat surprised to hear this because we had heard interest in early childhood programs has declined at many colleges and universities.

We discussed the philosophy of the center and the definition of high quality early childhood programs. The CSDC is a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Reggio Emilia is an Italian town that developed a unique

approach to preschool education. Programs that follow this approach are described as “Reggio Emilia inspired” as each program is unique. The fundamental principles of a Reggio Emilia-inspired program are as follow:

Children are capable of constructing their own learning;

Children form an understanding of themselves and their place in the world through their interactions with others;

Children are communicators;

The environment is the third teacher;

The adult is a mentor and guide;

An emphasis on documenting children’s thoughts;

Children have a hundred languages to show their understanding and express their thoughts and creativity.

The [North American Reggio Emilia Alliance \(NAREA\)](#) offers more information on their website.

The inspiration of Reggio Emilia is evident in the design of the CSDC classrooms, which look very different from the typical early childhood setting. There is an emphasis on design and beautiful surroundings. Walls and furnishings are soft colors, there are plants and other natural materials in the classrooms, family photos are prominently displayed, and abundant and varied art materials are available. Outside, in addition to an active play area, there is a woodland area to explore and many raised gardens that the children plant, care for, and harvest.

In the Reggio Emilia approach teachers follow the children’s lead and the curriculum evolves as the teachers document children’s questions, ideas and theories. Each child has a Journey Book which documents through pictures and text how that child is interacting with the environment and exploring ideas. The CSDC meets the NAEYC standards for high quality early childhood education. In addition, the Reggio-Emilia inspired aspects of the program add another level of quality focused on a unique environment and the high quality of teacher-child interactions made possible by the staffing levels and teacher training.

We also discussed how UNH faculty are helping to train kindergarten teachers throughout NH to implement a more play-based curriculum. Kimberly Nesbitt developed a series of training videos and over the past summer the UNH child development staff conducted seminars with kindergarten teachers to help them transition to a play-based curriculum. The staff is also doing ongoing intensive work with kindergarten teachers in the Dover and Coos County school systems. It will be interesting to read about the results of this training.

Another topic of discussion concerned the work that Lisa is doing with the State task force on quality child care. Child care is under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services whereas public Pre-K would be included in the Early Childhood Division of the Department of Education. Jessica told us how slim the educational requirements are for child care teachers: 18 credits for a lead teacher and 9 credits for a teacher. It was interesting to note that Lisa’s and Jessica’s perspective on the desirability of public Pre-K concerned the effect that it would have on child care centers. Lisa believes that she might lose her teachers to the public schools and child care programs would be decimated

because the public Pre-K positions, paid on the same salary scale as all other public school teachers, would be so much more desirable.

Lisa stated that she thought there were some interesting conversations going on at the state level about public Pre-K and that we should follow up with Kerry Kazura or Kimberly Nesbitt. She also suggested that Boston has an excellent Public Pre-K program and we might want to investigate what they are doing. She mentioned that Lisa Kuh could be a contact person for us in Boston.