

## **Early Childhood (ECAE)**

**Sharon Shaffer, Executive Director, Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center at the Smithsonian Institution; Adjunct Faculty for the University of Virginia. Tel: 202 633-1399; fax: 202 786-3153; e-mail: [shaffers@si.edu](mailto:shaffers@si.edu).**

**In recent weeks I have been reminded of the growth of early childhood education as a field and its new role within the broader system of education. For decades, professionals working with young children were seldom perceived as part of the mainstream dialogue on education, but rather were developing and refining ideas surrounding early learning apart from and independent of other educators. Today's world of education is looking more closely at the pre-kindergarten movement, examining the importance of learning in the early years, and embracing the value of education for young children. Evidence of this is clear in publications, advocacy, and dialogue.**

**Professional organizations such as NAEA recognized the early childhood contingent by giving a voice to educators committed to teaching the young and providing a platform for discussion and dialogue through support for the creation of the ECAE special interest group. ASCD [the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development] dedicated much of *Education Update*, its August 2007 newsletter, to issues surrounding pre-kindergarten education. The role of education of three and four-year-olds is being debated by a broad range of educators, politicians, and communities, which then offers early childhood professionals an opportunity to share important perspectives and become an integral part of the mainstream education system of our country. With this inclusion we hope to see progress and support for funding and quality across the field.**

**In mid August in Washington, DC the Museum Education Roundtable [MER], an organization that focuses on issues that relate to theory and practice in museums, met to discuss issues of education success in museum settings. In an open forum, area professionals discussed basic tenets of critical thinking and the role of schools and museums in shaping this essential skill. This forum included a presentation on the development of critical thinking in early learners and strategies for providing children with the building blocks that are the foundation for future success in problem solving. It is exciting to know that the learning experiences of very young children are of interest to this group of professionals and that serious conversation includes discussion about the museums' youngest visitors. This is not an isolated example but rather indicative of a trend that has been evident in museums since the mid 90s. It has become apparent that discussion about education now frequently includes theory and practice related to children under five years of age.**

**On an international level we see similar interest by organizations now embracing early learning. On November 10<sup>th</sup> an educational summit, sponsored by Fundacion Angel Ramos in Puerto Rico, is planned for early childhood educators and museum professionals. This event will focus on the value of museums as extensions of the**

**pre-school learning centers as educational institutions. I will have the honor of speaking with 400 educators about this important topic and sharing the successes of the Smithsonian's model museum-based program for young children.**

**In recent years we have also seen changes within early childhood education. We now think about learning that extends beyond the social, emotional, and cognitive realms that have been at the heart of the early childhood field for most of its history. Early childhood professionals in organizations such as NAEA and NAEYC [the National Association for the Education of Young Children] are now talking about aesthetic development in children and the place of the arts in learning as evidenced by offerings at local and national conferences.**

**Early childhood education is actively partnering with other organizations and making a place for itself within the broad education community. While we may need to continue to be advocates for young children for years to come, we have certainly attained a new status in many educational circles that allows us to be actively involved in important educational discussions that will help shape our children and society.**

### **Sharing Ideas**

**Take a few minutes to share information about programs and organizations for future ECAE columns by sending your ideas to [shaffers@si.edu](mailto:shaffers@si.edu). It is an exciting time in our field as we create a new vision for early childhood education. We all have the potential to contribute to shaping our future and will benefit by learning from the rich experiences and expertise of others.**