Childhood Education: Where Do We Go from Here?

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Until recently early childhood education had changed very little from the trends started 30 to 40 years ago, sparked by the findings and theories in developmental psychology and influenced by, among others, John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, and Patty Smith Hill. During the 1930's, what came to be called the "new" early childhood education blossomed with its child development approach and its emphasis upon the "whole" child. Initially the approach was exciting, and experimental programs gave promise of deeper insights into the teaching-learning process. Educators in nursery schools, kindergarten, and primary grades verbalized the same general aims, reflecting a belief in the importance of the early years, the need to pace the rapid growth of these years with learning appropriate to both the individual and the group, and on educational theory stressing continuity in learning experiences (1: 385-398).

As we moved into the 1940's and 50's, however, it became apparent that, even though the idea of the "new" early childhood education persisted, a wide gap existed between the expressed beliefs of teachers and the extent to which their teaching reflected these beliefs (2: 138-9). A lethargic state of sameness became evident in educational programs for young children.

Then suddenly there was "Sputnik" which made a tremendous impact on the educational scene in general with the beginnings of changes in programs extending to the very first school experiences of children.

What about these changes? Which trends might one consider constructive in improving instruction? Which trends might lead to unexpected consequences? In an effort to explore possible answers to these questions, the writer surveyed recent literature in the field and circulated a questionnaire to recognized leaders in early childhood education or related fields. There were 22 responses to the questionnaire. All but two people who answered gave permission to be quoted.

SIX TRENDS NOTED IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Trends in early childhood education as noted from the survey of both literature and the questionnaire fall into six main categories. Paramount is the desirability of change with particular attention given to the intellectual area of development. Dr. Kenneth Wann wrote, "I would say that the most significant stirring in early childhood education lies in an increased recognition that young children, because of their exposure to mass media of communication and to rapid travel, can know more than young children of a generation or two ago. There is interest in finding out what this broadened base of understanding means in terms of programs for young children." He spoke of the need to redefine our curriculum for young children and to revise

our concepts of their needs and interests (3).

Concern for greater intellectual challenge is indicated by: (a) greater attention to the structure of knowledge; (b) greater attention to the meaning of teaching; and (c) fewer interest-centered programs. Instead, more emphasis is being given to science and the skills of reading and arithmetic. For instance, more pressure is being exerted in some places to justify the maintenance of kindergartens by what Dr. Glenn Hawkes calls "beefing up" the program with the addition of workbooks, more emphasis on phonics, experimentation with reading, and by greater regimentation of children in general. This trend is also reflected by greater interest in new arithmetic programs and more attention to the early development of scientific thinking.

A second trend noted is greater attention to individualizing instruction with: (a) experimental grouping and more individualized teaching; (b) much attention to the gifted child; (c) more concern for the mentally retarded; (d) more attention being directed to children of all social classes, especially to culturally deprived children; and (e) increasing acceptance of Dr. Willard Olson's theory of developmental learning implemented by the concepts of seeking, self-selection, and pacing.

The third trend is a growing concern for the personality and cognitive development of young children. Dr. Fannie Schaftel speaks of teachers becoming more interested in children's self-concepts, their identification with others, and the relationship between individual and group behavior in terms of building democratic personalities. She recognizes the increasing emphasis on the cognitive development of young children —how they think and how they learn conceptual and systematic materials. She stresses that in spite of the experimentation with new programs in such areas as math and science, there is no real evidence on what children *can* and *should* learn.

EDUCATION SHOULD EMPHASIZE CREATIVITY IN CHILD

A fourth trend is more emphasis upon creativity, with concern for the too-conforming child and the practices which encourage conformity rather than creativity. Influential in this area have been the research findings of J. P. Guilford and his associates, Drevdahl, Cattell, Christensen, etc. from the Psychological Laboratory, University of Southern California; J. W. Getzels and P. W. Jackson, formerly of the University of Chicago; and Paul E. Torrance, Bureau of Educational Research, University of Minnesota.

The fifth trend is that related disciplines such as psychiatry and social work are making greater contributions to the over-all planning of programs for young children. Perhaps one should also mention the field of linguistics and the implications it may have for the teaching of reading.

RESEARCH RECEIVES GREATER IMPETUS

Last, but by no means least, is the trend toward increased interest in research. Noted from literature and from the majority of people answering the questionnaire is the need for more scientific research with more adequate controls in contrast to program development and demonstration lacking these controls. Dr. Hazel Lambert suggests that changes to be considered constructive will be "only those based on adequate research and we do not have enough to make judgments that are very sound." She mentioned one exception—social studies—where information possessed by young children has been found to be "vastly underrated." Dr. Lambert recommends a serious examination of the function of the nursery school today to determine what parts, if any, of the kindergarten program can be conducted with the nursery school child. It is her hypothesis that many very young children know more about their communities than we have thought, but she believes that this idea needs to be tested by research before any decision is made as to what goes where and why. Dr. Lambert further suggests that there are many readiness activities that can be carried on successfully at the kindergarten level but that teachers must move beyond the "*I think* or *I don't like* or *I like* stage with some research about what information children possess at the age of entrance to school whether it be nursery school, kindergarten, or first grade."

To the question: "What changes in philosophy and theory are you noting?", Dr. Roma Gans in her reply mentioned "a wide mixture ranging from significant studies in children's thinking by such scholars as Millie Almy to bandwagon emphases unrelated to basic considerations of children." Dr. Almy's research on concept development was found by this writer to be repeatedly mentioned as worthy of careful study. Examples of other important research studies, completed or in process, include the work of Jerome Bruner, Barbel Inhelder, Kenneth Wann and associates, Bernard Spodek, Dolores Durkin, David Page, and studies being conducted in the San Francisco area by Stanford University.

The six main trends in early childhood education summarized above are mainly evaluated as constructive. There seems to be general agreement that change is desirable and interest in change a healthy sign.

Historically, educational programs for young children developed from philosophy. This base is now considered by many to be inadequate for decision-making in the area of curriculum. The survey gave strong indications that we are moving rather

rapidly in the direction of scientific research as a more enlightened and well-founded basis for educational thinking.

Which trends might lead to unexpected, undesirable consequences? What recommendations are suggested to avoid this possibility?

CONCERNS FOCUS ON EARLY NEEDS

Three concerns will be discussed briefly. First is what Dr. Kenneth Wann terms interpreting the need for greater intellectual challenge to mean "teaching earlier and in the same way what we formerly have defined as content for older children." Specifically, this is reflected in kindergarten programs by the use of workbooks, hectographed materials, and other formal "reading readiness" activities in the symbolic area; by teaching reading in the kindergarten as part of the so-called earlier challenge; by using the kindergarten to *prepare* for first grade; by pushing children into rote learning of facts without meaning for them; and by pressure for subject-centered departmentalization.

Wann expresses concern for this interpretation: "To many people this is an inappropriate use of the five-year-old's time. They feel that there need to be significant challenges in the kindergarten for the five-year-old but that these challenges do not reside in the formal reading or reading readiness programs using workbooks and other such paraphernalia." He believes that a more appropriate approach may be the building of basic understandings which the child needs as a result of increased travel and communication and suggests that a more effective way to build these may involve the discovery of more experiences in which young children can deal with concrete ideas — ways in which we can use the young child's need for manipulation and exploration of his environment.

Dr. William Sheldon reacts similarly: ". . . I would modify the kindergarten briefly in the direction of focusing on concepts—listening and speaking experiences—to a greater extent than ever before." He looks upon the introduction of reading in the kindergarten as a "negative sort of activity." He recommends more individualization in the primary grades, emphasizing not just individualized reading but a broad program providing for (a) accelerated instruction for the bright child who might be able to complete what we have called primary skills in one or two years rather than in three or four; (b) a broader program of listening, speaking, and concept development for impoverished children at the first grade level; and (c) delayed introduction of reading for these children as much as one and a half or two years. He sees "no profit in instructing six-year-olds who are in a maze or a daze during this period."

ROLE OF STRUCTURE INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT

Dr. Jerome Bruner (4:38-9) stresses the role of structure in teaching and learning—the importance of not pressing simply for the "mastery of facts and techniques" but teaching in such a way that children learn to understand the basic principles underlying any given subject and are given many opportunities to use basic ideas "in progressively more complex forms." Bruner declares: "What is most important for teaching basic concepts is that the child be helped to pass progressively from concrete thinking to the utilization of more conceptually adequate modes of thought. *But it is futile to attempt this by presenting formal explanations based on a logic that is distant from the child's manner of thinking and sterile in its implications for him.*" *(Italics added)*

Bruner further suggests that "if the dangers of meritocracy and competitiveness, the risks of over-emphasis on science and technology, and the devaluation of humanistic learning are to be dealt with, we shall have to maintain and nurture a vigorous pluralism in America. The theater, the arts, music, and the humanities as presented in our schools and colleges will need the fullest support" (4:80).

CHILDREN NEED CHALLENGE, NOT FORCE

Dr. Alice Keliher (5:3-9) cautions against pushing children but at the same time suggests that criticisms of *pushing* should not be confused with the simultaneous plea for genuine challenge and motivation. "There is often too little of the latter approach to learning. . . . When we free children for discovery and exploration, we do not need to push from behind, as it were." Keliher urges teachers to motivate, to challenge, and to stretch the mind but to "think deeply before you move in the direction of more schemes and devices that move counter to the best growth and development of children."

GOALS IN EDUCATION NEED CAREFUL STUDY

Urie Bronfenbrenner (6:6-18) comments that "with the firing of the first Sputnik, Achievement began to replace Adjustment as the highest goal of the American way of life. We have become concerned — perhaps even obsessed — with 'education for excellence'—and the maximal utilization of our intellectual resources." But he adds:

> The prospect of a society in which socialization techniques are directed toward maximizing achievement drive is not altogether a pleasant one. As a number of investigators have shown (Baldwin, Kalhorn and Breese, 1945; Baldwin, 1948; Haggard, 1957; Winterbottom, 1958; Rosen and D'Andrade, 1959) high achievement motivation appears to flourish in a family of 'cold democracy'

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reasonable teacher security is not denied, but can this be only a one-way street? Will additional money and security automatically bring about the needed revisions and improvement in the educational program? Openshaw has succinctly surveyed the national scene and reports:

> The teaching profession in general has a long tradition of not facing squarely and realistically the issues involved in the evaluation of competence. It is understandable that much effort in the past has centered around improving conditions of work, salary, and class size and around developing procedures and policies to bring job stability and security to teachers. These are important and legitimate areas of concern, and substantial gains have been made. What is difficult to understand is that the profession as a whole has not given comparable concern to developing policies and procedures for safeguarding students and public against incompetence and unprofessional behavior on the part of some teachers. . . . With rights go responsibilities—responsibilities which the profession has traditionally been unwilling to assume. The time has long passed for the profession to recognize that evaluation of the quality of service within the profession is a responsibilities it cannot shirk (5).

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> in which initial high levels of maternal involvement are followed by pressures for independence and accomplishment. Nor does the product of this process give ground for reassurance. True, children from achievement-oriented homes excel in planfulness and performance, but they are also more aggressive, tense, domineering, and cruel (Baldwin, Kalhorn and Breese, 1945; Baldwin, 1948; Haggard, 1957). It would appear that education for excellence if pursued single-mindedly may entail some sobering social costs.

Creativity, the third area of concern, is directly related to the first discussed above—the tendency toward more formalization of programs at the younger levels. Dr. Fannie Schaftel said, "I am concerned about premature structuring for young children. Both Lois Barclay Murphy and Barbara Biber emphasized the need for freedom of exploration in order to develop autonomy both physically and cognitively for later life. We need more interesting and meaningful activities that are *qualitatively* better, not 'more' sooner!"

Barbara Biber in a paper entitled "Premature Structuring as a Deterrent to Creativity" (7:2) develops the proposition "that education traditionally has imposed a structure of didactic instruction, right-wrong criteria, dominance of the logical-objective over the intuitive-subjective on the learning child so early in the course of emergent awareness of his world and of himself that, except for unusual individuals, creative potential is inhibited or, at the least, diminished."

It has become recognized by many people that a more thorough understanding of creativity and its aspects is an immediate social need. It is believed that creative behavior will be a necessary requirement for adaptation to the "new world" if we are to survive. However, society as a whole looks with disfavor on many of the qualities associated with creativity. Teachers who for the most part hold middle class values, reflect society's disfavor and quite often emphasize conformity. One of the results of the Getzels-Jackson study (8), replicated by Paul Torrance with similar findings, indicates that creative children are often not even recognized by teachers or are considered "problems," or at best, less appealing. Despite superior achievement, they may fail to gain the same personal preference from teachers that more-conforming children with high I.Q.'s seem to have.

O. L. Peterson and J. T. Robinson (9:420-7) suggest (based on Guilford research) that the best opportunity for producing creative individuals is by developing factors of curiosity, originality, imagination, problem-solving ability and by a broad experiential background for children.

Robert W. Scofield (10:5-6) states that a child must not be bound by anxieties and fear of punishment for having thoughts and ideas different from those of the parent or teacher but should be free to try new ideas, conclusions, and answers. His suggestions for a favorable classroom climate include: (a) avoiding any lock-step method of keeping everyone on the same thought and page; (b) letting children struggle with a problem (the very essence of creativity), giving them practice and experience in bringing facts into new relationships on their own; (c) de-emphasizing any need for immediately giving one and only one "right" answer; and (d) giving no punishment in any form for any attempted incorrect response.

CHILDREN NEED FREEDOM TO LEARN

Robert C. Wilson (11:19-23) on the basis of two studies (*A Factor-Analytic Study of Creative Thinking,*

and a study carried on at Pennsylvania State University) has made a number of suggestions for encouraging creativity. First, using as evidence the common characteristics of eminent scientists which have been studied—strong interests at an early age which have carried into adulthood so that they worked with "persistent intensity and single-minded devotion" —he suggests less concern for the well-rounded individual. Instead of forcing children to play down their strong interests, he believes it would be more effective for teachers to encourage children to develop these interests. Second, using a research concept—capacity for intense concentration on a problem which leads the more creative individual to become aware of the possibility of finding things out first hand for himself—he suggests that creativity can be promoted by encouraging children to work out their own solutions to problems and by letting them toy with problems which do not have pat answers.

These are only a few examples of many studies and articles on the subject of creativity. They suggest that society may need to modify some of its values to include those qualities which seem to be associated with creativity if creative behavior is considered a necessary requirement for adjustment and survival in the space age. Drevdahl (11) points out that we might well discard some of the emphasis on adjustment and avoid the kind of teaching aimed at helping potentially creative people to acquire a "placid but unproductive contentedness." The creative person, he says, appears to possess what Matthew Arnold described as "the divine discontent." The implication here for the education of children of all ages seems obvious.

In summary, then, the general feeling expressed concerning recent trends in early childhood education would indicate that taking a serious look at past and present practices is desirable provided careful thought precedes any change. The need for more adequate research upon which to base decisions is repeated again and again. In the midst of conflict and confusion about education of the young child, there are glimmers of hope. If one recommendation alone were to be made, it would be to find ways of providing appropriate intellectual challenge for children while still giving support to their personality needs. It is not an "either—or" proposition. There is no magic formula which will solve the problem of adding depth to the curriculum, although the danger exists that in anxiety we will snatch at straws with little attention given to long-term consequences. Pressures, pushes, and forces must be resolved, but we must maintain a constructive balance.

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