

# Growing Room for Young Children

ELIZABETH MECHEM FULLER

In this article Elizabeth Mechem Fuller, associate professor and principal, Institute of Child Welfare, the University of Minnesota, takes a comprehensive look at the situation in early childhood education. Mrs. Fuller insists that in planning educational programs for young children we provide "not only sitting room but growing room."

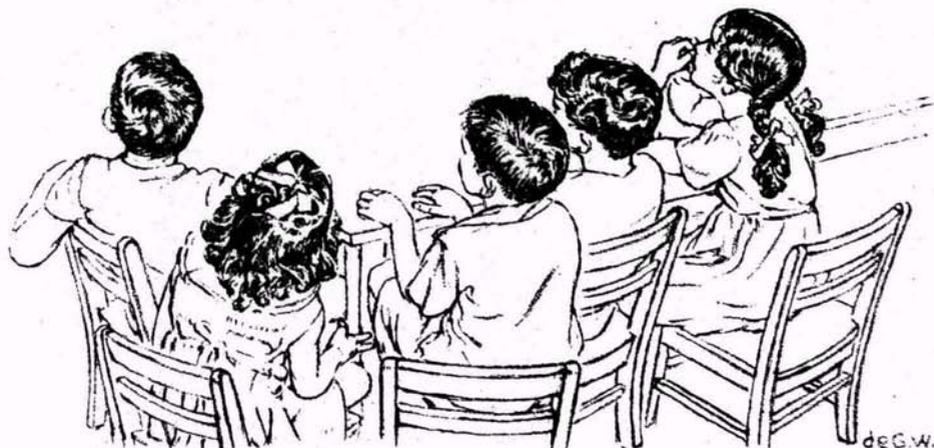
MODERN EDUCATORS find themselves in much the same position as modern nuclear physicists—not satisfied with what they've got, endowed with enormous responsibilities, and scared to death at what may be ahead. The intelligent physicist and the educator behave similarly in such crises—they will inventory what they have, classify their weaknesses and strengths, do something about the weaknesses, utilize the strengths, and face the future with determination.

## Inventory Reveals Weaknesses

For the educator, an inventory of resources reveals weaknesses which seem at first overpowering. Every survey adds to the story of shortage of

buildings, teachers, and materials. Every research report makes a clear-cut case for the vital necessity of doing a better job than ever before in educating young children. Every census warns us what is ahead—for example, there were 3,250,000 babies born in 1946 in the United States—a quarter-million more than the record year of 1943. The school year 1949-50 will see the 1943 record group entering elementary schools. At the beginning of 1949 there were about 11,500,000 children between two and five years of age who will enter school within the next five years.

In spite of the fact that schools are already filled far beyond capacity, only ten percent of the twos to fives attend



*From Education for All American Children*

school; twenty-seven percent of the fives, sixty-nine percent of the sixes, ninety-two percent of the sevens, and ninety-five percent of the eights.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, even to extend early childhood education to all five- and six-year-olds represents a staggering burden to present facilities.

#### Are the "Under Tens" Neglected?

Nursery school attendance is advocated by such groups as the American Society of Pediatricians, the Association for Childhood Education, the Educational Policies Commission, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. The need for the provision of good nursery schools, at least on a permissive basis, has been established so firmly that the subject can no longer be called controversial. Yet extension of school age downward, when seen in relation to the practical problems involved, raises many complicated problems.

One major point seems quite clear—*that children under eight to ten years of age are not now getting enough in amount or kind of group education which is compatible with their needs and maturity levels.* In addition, the outlook for the future suggests that they will fare even less well than at present unless major attempts are made to expand educational facilities. Thus, the area called "early childhood education" merits added attention and thought in the immediate future. Since the child's earliest contacts with school play such a significant role in determining his later adjustments and in governing the quality of later home-school

relationships, efforts directed toward improving childhood education may be considered forward-looking and preventive, vital to the school's economy.

#### Teachers and Groups Air Their Views

In order to arrive at measures for doing a better job with smaller children, interesting leads come from reports concerning present conditions by teachers in the field. This year the Association for Childhood Education issued a bulletin entitled, "Are These Our Schools?" The bulletin analyzed returns from questionnaires sent to 160 nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary teachers in forty states. The questionnaire asked teachers what conditions in their schools handicap them in meeting the needs of children and what is being done to overcome these handicaps. Responses revealed that even before the 1943 crop of babies had reached school age, teachers were universally discouraged over the conditions under which they must teach.

Their responses give some indication as to what conditions will be in 1949-50 in first grades where children are supposed to acquire basic reading and study habits. Descriptive indeed is the ACE bulletin committee's method of classifying what is being done to improve conditions:

*"Informing, conferring, arousing, constructing, adjusting, adding, studying, encouraging, improving, trying, using, arranging, grouping, delaying, limiting, waiting, asking, begging, borrowing—Nothing."*

Such hit-and-miss approaches would bankrupt any commercial venture in a very short time—yet with young chil-

<sup>1</sup>"Schools for Children Under Six." Washington, D. C.: U. S. Office of Education, Bulletin No. 5, 1947.

dren, raw material of highest value, schools thus far squander their meager resources. A recent spokeswoman at the 1949 NEA convention sought to prove that it is more expensive to have poor schools for little children than good ones.\* Her points were well taken even without the fortification of such figures as costs of juvenile delinquency, psychoses, broken homes, slums, dictatorships, war—direct or indirect results of too little or wrong types of education in the earlier formative years.

In the foregoing paragraphs are represented three groups who should know a great deal about current needs in early childhood education: the U. S. Office of Education, ACE, and NEA. All of these groups voice concerted pleas for a simple, straightforward look at the state of affairs in schools today. The chief weaknesses existing in early childhood education are reflected in the glaring discrepancies between the number of children to be educated and the money, buildings, teachers, and equipment available to do the job.

To remedy these basic weaknesses, only one general course is feasible: *to promote effective legislative bases for providing adequate school funds and then to train good teachers, administrators, and school board members to spend these funds strategically.* Provision of funds and recruiting of personnel involve a gigantic effort to improve public relations between schools and the general public by means of careful interpretation and dissemination of information about schools, not mere propagandizing or political maneuvering.

\* Mabel Studebaker, NEA president, unpublished address at 1949 convention, Boston.

## A Grass-Roots Approach

Rather than to sound the discouraging note that nothing can be done without all recommended major changes being brought about immediately or to indulge in unproductive wishful thinking, a more realistic grass-roots approach offers hope for slow but sure progress in which each and every educator can share. This approach takes the position that the best way to raise the level of all education is to give children a better *start* in school; the best way to avoid undue amounts of remedial work in learning or behavior is to take early preventative measures; the best way to keep boys and girls in school is to develop in them as early as possible so great an interest in school life that continuation through high school is the natural thing to do. In short, a great deal more emphasis is placed upon knowing what the smallest children are like, and what their school needs really are.

## Help from Child Development Research

The question of "how" arises immediately—how to learn more about little children, and how to put this knowledge into practice. For the purpose of discussion and illustration, one way will be discussed here which is offered as a potentially hopeful tool for producing an improved educational system for small children:

*Let the educator recognize as one of the major strengths in modern education the existence in printed, pictorial, film, or record form the fruits of years of child development research.*

Paradoxical as it may seem, public school administrators typically have

had little or no training in child growth and development related to children under ten years of age, even those who are superintendents or principals in schools where from sixty to eighty percent of the children are under ten years of age. For example, in a midwestern city of approximately 400,000 population, there are twenty-two junior and senior high schools as compared with seventy-six elementary schools, yet all major administrative positions are held by persons trained in secondary education and school administration, with little or no training in either child growth and development or early childhood education. One specific avenue of approach to aid younger children, then, is through the individual or group endeavor of administrators and teachers to acquaint themselves further with child development literature.

#### Using What We Know About Children

Consider, for example, the principle emphasized repeatedly in child development research that the youngster in early childhood is, biologically, primarily an energy system with an incredibly rapid intake and output; that the tremendous output of energy and activity of the child under seven or eight is so essential that to repress it is actually injurious to the organism.

With this principle in mind it is hard to reconcile the attitudes of those who plan kindergarten and primary grade classrooms as miniatures of sixth or seventh grade rooms. The lack of provision in the kindergarten and primary grades for the expenditure of physical energy must assume a large share of the blame for producing poor behavior patterns, learning failures,

poor mental hygiene, and negative attitudes toward school in general.

#### Human Dynamos Need Outlets

In converting developmental data into classroom use, the teacher must resort to a rather broad interpretation of principles. He must see, for example, that provision for energy expenditure includes more than mere scheduling of extra recess periods or turning children loose on the playground or in the gymnasium to "let off steam." Rather, careful attention must be given to space requirements, choice of functional movable furniture, recognition of "readiness" factors, programming for alternation of activity and rest, development of attitudes which makes it *right* for children to be active rather than passive, and development of integrated programs in which the school nurse, psychologist, and visiting teacher all share responsibility.

It is difficult to convince adults who are unfamiliar with the facts of early growth and development that little children need more space than larger children; that docility and conformity in a four-, five-, or six-year-old is not as desirable as activity and constructive noise; that even the best adjusted six-year-old will spend a great amount of time in social and emotional conflict if he is not supplied with desirable outlets for physical and mental energy in the form of subject matter, construction, and play equipment commensurate with his growth status. It falls to the teacher or administrator to justify school changes in facilities, programming, or teaching methods—responsibilities which can be aided by knowledge of developmental factors.

## Providing a Broad Repertoire of Experiences

Research sources also make a convincing case for the advantage of introducing early in the child's life as broad a repertoire of experiences, including wide experience in social groups, as his age and maturity level permit. Evidence supporting the value of nursery school and kindergarten experiences to the extent that few arguments (such as per pupil cost) remain to justify delaying the extension of school admission age downward.

The well-trained nursery school and kindergarten teacher is qualified to make judgments which will safeguard the young child against the dwarfing or frustrating effects of repeated experiences with materials either too easy or too difficult. She is qualified to plan an environment which facilitates rather than hinders the natural process of growth. There are those who are inclined to argue the cause of nursery schools and kindergartens chiefly on the basis of such atypical situations as the increased number of broken homes, working mothers resulting from war years, or as special clinics where children with severe behavior problems may be sent. However, research experiments in child development identify many advantages for the priority of learnings in early school experience for *all* children.

To cite areas in which satisfying early experiences seem to promote higher later levels of understanding and achievement, three might be mentioned:

☐ Contacts with children of many races, religions, and cultures in nursery schools

and kindergartens foster a high level of intercultural relationships and build fundamental attitudes of tolerance and cooperative endeavor that are not later achieved as naturally and easily.

☐ Sound basic habits of eating, sleeping, toileting, washing, and dressing evolve naturally where children live with their peers in an environment designed especially for them. Training in basic habits at nursery school age is forward-looking and preventative; if delayed to six or seven it is of necessity backward-looking and corrective.

☐ Children set their habits of intellectual curiosity or disinterest very early; the early school years supplement and complement the home in providing as many satisfying experiences as possible to develop positive attitudes toward the search for scientific truths.

## Early Years Are Crucial

School teachers and administrators should be aware of reasons such as those mentioned above which cause the clinician, the psychiatrist, the social worker, and others familiar with behavioral and learning ills of children all to probe back farther and farther into the early years of a child's life for clues to their maladjustments. Schools cannot much longer evade their responsibilities for giving all children the best possible start toward wholesome group relationships in living and learning.

This "best possible start" includes not merely earlier admission to school, but also the direction of a group of adults who reflect a thorough understanding of the small growing child. There is no short-cut to such understanding, no course other than steady accumulation of scientific knowledge

(Continued on page 59)

## National, State, and Local Support

It should be pointed out that there have been some noteworthy gains for rural children during recent years. In at least seventeen states action is under way to reduce the number of small districts and to establish units of school administration large enough to provide more and better educational services. It appears highly probable that within the next few years other states will move in the same direction.

Gains have also been made in the amount of support given by the state to local districts and a number of states have been recognizing to a greater degree the desirability of establishing a foundation program of school support which would provide the essential educational services for all children.

However, even if every state equalizes the opportunities for every child within its borders, creates optimum size school districts, and establishes larger rural elementary schools wherever practicable, glaring inequalities in opportunity for an adequate education will still exist for millions of rural children. The states that are least able to pay for

an adequate educational program are those having the highest proportions of rural children.

In fourteen states the income for 1944 back of each child (rural and urban) of school age was more than \$6000. In only one of these states was the percentage of school age farm children as much as one-third of all school age children; in eleven states the percentage was less than one-fifth of the total; and in four states less than one-tenth.

But at the other end of the scale there were eleven states where the income back of each school age child (rural or urban) was less than \$3000. In eight of these states more than half of all children of school age lived on farms; in the remaining three states the proportions of farm children were one-third or more.<sup>19</sup>

The great differences among the states in the wealth per child make federal aid for public school education imperative. Moreover, it is the rural children who are in greatest need for this assistance from the national level.

<sup>19</sup>Unpublished data on file in NEA Dept. of Rural Education. op. cit.

## *Growing Room for Young Children*

---

(Continued from page 53)

about him as a living, active, energy system which starts at a very early age to fix its habit patterns, its attitudes toward its learning, and to make itself felt socially.\*

Since the public school of the immediate future is going to be obliged to adjust and expand tremendously to provide even sitting room for the

11,500,000 little children approaching its portals, now seems to be an opportune time to suggest that this adjustment include not only better school laws, more funds, better buildings, and suitable materials, but also better informed teachers and administrators to insure for these children not only sitting room but *growing* room.

Copyright © 1949 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.