

Poverty, Education, and the Young Child

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THE DECADE of the sixties might be characterized as the decade of the disadvantaged inasmuch as societal concerns for children and for the poor are converging in public education today. Students of poverty are aware of its cyclical nature as the poor of one generation establish conditions which perpetuate poverty in the next generation. The need to break this cycle has brought the role of education into sharp focus.

Schools are developing programs for the disadvantaged. Programs for drop-outs, or for youth from the slums who might attend college, are becoming familiar phenomena in high schools, as are enrichment and remedial programs in elementary schools in city slums. However, in dealing with the educational problems of the poor, the schools are becoming increasingly aware that they are arriving on the scene of development too late and providing too little to really effect significant change. A "new" approach is being heralded—the development of pre-primary educational programs for children of poverty.

Historical Perspective: The attempt to meet the needs of the preschool disadvantaged children is not, however, a recent concern of early childhood educators. For more than half a century, the nursery school and kindergarten have been viewed by early childhood educators as one answer to the needs of impoverished children. At the turn of the

century, Free Kindergarten associations were organized throughout the United States and England. These associations provided kindergartens in slum areas for children whose families could not afford the fees charged by private kindergartens.

The nursery school was originally conceived as an answer to the problems of the young child growing up in an urban slum community. The first nursery school was organized in the heart of a London slum to meet the needs of a disadvantaged population. Over the years, because of the lack of public support in the United States, nursery schools have catered to the middle class. The lack of public funds for nursery education created nursery schools which were available only to children whose families could afford to underwrite the total cost of schooling. The day care center became the "nursery school" of the impoverished. This distorted picture has developed in the United States because of the exclusion of nursery schools and, in some communities and states, kindergartens from public education. Kindergartens are not supported by state aids in some twenty-six states. This has created a situation where at times the school systems in communities with the highest percentage of families in poverty have no kindergartens, while affluent communities in the same states have them.

Justification for Preschool Programs for

Disadvantaged Children: If one is not prone to accept the evidence of historical concern, then it is well to look at several theoretical arguments that may be used to justify pre-primary education as a basis for raising the intellectual performance and academic achievement of disadvantaged children. Most of these positions relate to newer conceptions of intellectual development which attack the concept of fixed intelligence and suggest that experiences are the major determinant of a person's intelligence.

Piaget (12) has done extensive studies of intellectual development over the past several decades. His theory suggests that the child progresses through a series of stages in intellectual development. At each stage the child interacts with his environment, through the processes of assimilation and accommodation, bringing new ideas into his developing intellectual schema and changing these schema as they no longer fit the information gathered. While Piaget sees these stages as invariant, the rate at which children move through these stages can differ. Development, states Piaget, is influenced by four main factors: maturation, experience, social transmission, and equilibrium, or self-regulation. Piaget reports such variations in a study of Iranian children, in which rural children were reported to be far behind urban children in their intellectual development due to a differentiated environment. In an American replication of one of Piaget's tests, Almy (1) found that, in a comparison of private school and day care children (who would represent lower class families), day care children's thinking was less mature and qualitatively different from that of the private school children.

Hunt (8) has synthesized the theories of Piaget with other studies in learning

and intellectual development. Hunt uses the model of the computer for his theory and compares thinking to data processing. Hunt suggests that the early years of development play a significant role in providing the generalized conceptual skills needed for later learning. He further suggests the need to provide environmental enrichment activities that are matched to the child's developmental level at each stage. Hunt's suggestion of the possibility of increasing intelligence for children through environmental manipulation appears to be a direct outgrowth of the evidence he presents. His assertion that Montessori education would be most appropriate for young children, especially those from impoverished background, does not necessarily follow from his data.

Bloom's recent study of human development (4) based upon longitudinal and other studies, presents the proposition that environmental variations can have their greatest effect during the period of rapid change for that characteristic. For many developmental characteristics, including height, intelligence, and intellectuality, as well as aggressiveness in males and dependency in females, fully half of the human organism's total development occurs before the child reaches school age. Even general school achievement is half developed by grade three. This would suggest that in order for environmental manipulation to have its greatest impact in the area of intelligence, it ought to occur during the preschool years. Since school achievement generally begins developing in grade one, educators can only speculate about the potential impact of preschool programs on this characteristic.

The research cited here suggests that a child's intelligence will vary as a function of his environment and that early

environmental manipulation can have maximum impact in accelerating intellectual development. It further suggests that children who are impoverished economically are also impoverished in environmental stimulation. In order to develop preschool educational programs for poor children, one needs to know the significant ways in which the environment of poor children is different from that of the rest of society's children, and the particular kinds of intellectual stimulation that these children lack.

Deutsch (5) suggests that the urban slum offers the child a minimum of visual stimuli, with few pictures. The furniture, toys and utensils of the small child are sparse, repetitious, and lacking in form and color. Few manipulative objects are available to these children, while the urban environment has removed the child from stimulating encounters with natural phenomena which were available to poor children in previous eras. The slum child also comes from a home that is not verbally oriented, causing difficulties in the child's auditory discrimination, just as the lack of visual stimuli creates difficulties in form discrimination and visual and spatial organization. Added to these are deficiencies in memory training, a lack of expectation of reward for performance, and an inability to use adults as a source of information, correction and reality testing.

Bernstein (3) has studied differences in language development between the lower and middle classes and has defined these as differences in kind. He suggests that entirely different language systems exist within each of these classes. Bernstein has described the language of the lower class as a "public" language (later termed *restricted*), as contrasted with the "formal" language (later termed *elaborated*) of the middle class. The "public"

language is characterized by short, grammatically simple sentences. It is limited and condensed, containing symbols of a low order or generality. It is a language of implicit meaning. The "formal" language is more accurate and grammatically correct. It is precise and can express a wide range of thought. The limitation of the "public" language will limit the kind of ideas that can be expressed and communicated, as well as the kind of thought that can be symbolized and ordered within it. The differences in language systems between these two segments of society can also cause a lack of understanding as individuals attempt to communicate between the two.

Hess' (7) studies of the mother-child interaction as a supporter of cognitive style and learning open another dimension to the problem of class-related environmental differences that might affect learning and intellectual development. To date, three aspects of successful teaching in these interaction situations have been identified. First, the mother must provide her young student with the tags or symbols for the important features of the lesson she hopes to teach. Secondly, there must be opportunities for her to receive feedback from the child. Finally, the mother must motivate the child to engage in the learning process. Hess' research tends to place intellectual development within the context of human interaction and suggests that, in a study of environmental differences, the significant human beings in a child's life and their various attributes must be considered as an important variable.

These variables of environmental stimulation, human interaction, and language activities provide the educator with guidelines upon which to propose effective programs for impoverished preschool children. In the past few years,

several research or demonstration preschool programs have been developed. A review of these should provide additional insight into the effectiveness of the approach of using preschool education to maximize educational opportunity for the poor.

Preschool Programs for Disadvantaged Children: The traditions of the nursery school and kindergarten, and the years of experience that these traditions represent, plus the implication of the research reviewed here, provide a valuable resource for developing new programs for disadvantaged children. The rooting of the newer programs to be discussed in these traditions and this research can provide evidence of their appropriateness. Older conceptions of education, including the concept of "nurturance" as education stated by McMillan in her early works on the nursery school (10) need to be tested along with the newer conceptions presently being developed. Some important research on the effects of preschool programs has been done in the past, but this research has often been spotty and poorly designed. Fortunately, recent reviews of research in the area of nursery education, such as those by Sears and Dowley (13) and Swift (15), are readily available.

The research presented here as justification for preschool programs for disadvantaged children would suggest that there might be a different set of practices necessary for the optimum education of the children of the poor. While the projects devised to identify or demonstrate such programs are still in the "progress report" stage, providing at best inconclusive statements of results, a review of these programs should prove fruitful.

Deutsch's project (6) in cooperation with the New York City Public Schools, is probably the best known of the pre-

school programs. This project contains a variety of more basic research studies along with its educational components. Deutsch utilizes a basic nursery school curriculum closely related to those found in high quality preschool programs. In addition to this, a variety of special enrichment techniques are provided. These techniques center around the areas of cognitive functioning, memory training, language development and motivation. Although Deutsch has described specific elements of his program, a full description of his entire curriculum is not yet available, though it has been promised.

Olson and Larsen (11), in their program for disadvantaged kindergarten children, focused on providing an abundance of field trips and supportive language experience for their children. This program was developed on the assumption that the children's limited experience had limited the development of a reservoir of concepts. By increasing the breadth of experience, it was assumed that there would be an increase in the children's accumulation of concepts necessary for successful school achievement.

The Baltimore Early Admissions Program (2) provides school experiences for disadvantaged four-year-olds. Descriptions of the curriculum established reveal a program based upon sound principles of early childhood education appropriate to all children. The focus on individual differences, firsthand experiences and a sensory-rich learning environment, with particular attention to language development and the development of self-concept, suggest that the Baltimore adaptation is based as much upon individual differences as upon cultural differences.

Klaus and Gray's report (9) on their Early Training Project similarly suggests the use of major elements of the traditional approach to preschool education

in their curriculum with some specific differences. The ratio of adults to children in this program is high, as it is in the Baltimore program. Other differences reported pertain primarily to the allocation of time for activities and the specific uses made of some of the materials. Strodtbeck's (14) "reading readiness nursery school" suggests by its title a specific program of prereading experiences. His program report indicates, however, that a "conventional nursery" experience was provided. Strodtbeck's suggestion that a particular teaching style, characterized as the "Yiddisha Mama" technique might be particularly potent for poor children is a provocative one. The question of the effects of various teaching styles on young, culturally disadvantaged children could bear further investigation.

As already stated, these projects are now in progress. Results to date on the effect of these programs have been more indicative than conclusive. The common areas of the curriculum stressed are the development of cognitive skills, language facility, self concept, and motivational patterns, as well as an increase in environmental stimulation. Each of the programs described is firmly rooted in the conventions of the nursery school and kindergarten.

In conclusion, preschool programs for disadvantaged children will become more numerous in the next few years. Federal money available through grants from the U. S. Children's Bureau and the Office of Economic Opportunity will provide a powerful stimulus to their development. It will be exceedingly important that the developers of these programs base new curricula on knowledge of the effects of long established traditional approaches to early childhood education as well as on newer practices that are shown to be

effective by contemporary research. Presently developing research could be more valuable to the field if there were a concerted effort to factor out the effects of traditional nursery school practices from those of the more innovative practices.

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Teachers—Dixon

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to license teachers and retain only role occupants of decided competence.

2. Work to secure adequate salaries for teachers. Many teachers are required to attend summer school periodically to hold their jobs. Also, they must buy the trappings of class status which the community requires. Often through no fault of their own, many teachers are victims of loan sharks. Others, especially men teachers, turn to moonlighting to supplement their inadequate salaries.

3. Work to attain job security for teachers. Teachers should not have to bow before school boards and the public to maintain their jobs. Teacher tenure laws should be sought. Teachers should be protected from scurrilous attack by laymen and the caprice of administrators.

4. Work to develop a national system of award for outstanding teacher performance. Such awards should be as significant as the Pulitzer prizes and should be based upon clearly defined criteria.

5. Work to develop a strong, positive image of teachers. Mass media should be carefully studied to determine the image

cast about teachers. Ways should be devised to prevent an Ichabod Crane image of teachers from being disseminated. Professional associations on all levels must themselves develop a strong, effective system of public relations which adequately portrays the profession to the public.

6. Work for full and complete involvement of Negroes in all aspects of professional endeavor. Professional associations need to purge themselves of the guilt of moral bankruptcy caused by decades of silence and lethargy in this matter.

7. Work to exert greater influence in local, state, and national politics.

Vigorous and intelligent action can foster greater social mobility for teachers. With the war on poverty already joined, teachers and teaching assume a new importance. This, coupled with a greater need for lifelong education, forecasts teachers as more important role occupants. A country which rests upon an informed citizenry must commit itself to increased wealth, esteem, and social power for teachers.

"Tough" Schools—Gorman & Ritchie

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Faith in the learner is fundamental. Too many teachers appraise a situation and find it hopeless. They let themselves expect limited results. It is not at all surprising that those are exactly the results achieved. The teacher must have faith in the learner's ability and willingness to learn, and he must have equal faith in his own capacity to teach him. The reverse is common on the educational front generally, but nowhere is it more frequently found than among culturally disadvantaged pupils.

4. *Are culturally disadvantaged youth inherently reluctant learners?*² The nine

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