

# IS "MASSIVE INTERVENTION" THE ANSWER?

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"COMPULSORY Nursery Schooling Proposed to Cut Dropouts Later." Thus read the headline of an article in the *New York Times* one day some two years ago (2). At the time the proposal sounded outlandish, certainly not practical enough to be implemented by public educators.

Yet we have just witnessed a summer in which as many as 600,000 culturally disadvantaged preschool children have been attending federally supported pre-kindergarten programs. These programs were designed to offset the effects of deprived early environments in the hope that the preschool experience would provide the children with a greater opportunity for success in later schooling. Early education, a form of developmental intervention, was provided on a mass basis.

The possibility that such programs of preschool education might be continued in the future, possibly on an even greater scale, has caused educators to raise a host of questions:

Is the provision of prekindergarten education the most plausible solution to the problems of educating the disadvantaged?

Are the early years the best years in the life of the child to attempt to effect change?

If educational programs for young children are to be developed, what experiences need to be included in these programs?

What safeguards are needed in such programs to protect the young child?

There have been few times in the history of American education when nursery schools have received any major public support. The depression of the '30's and the World War of the '40's brought such federal aid for nursery schools. In each case, this was an attempt to deal with a social crisis. Once again a program of major support of nursery school programs from public funds seems to be developing.

This is in contrast to the normal state of affairs in early childhood education as only a small minority of American children, and these predominantly from more affluent families, are generally enrolled in nursery school programs. Projected census figures for nursery age children estimate that about 4.3 percent of the three year olds, and 14.9 percent of the four year olds were enrolled in educational programs. Even

at the kindergarten level, only about 58 percent of the five year olds are in attendance in kindergartens (4). Most nursery programs are in private, rather than in publicly supported schools, again a contrast to the projected picture of a massive program of early education.

### **Why a Program of Intervention?**

A program of early education for the multitudes would require large expenditures of public funds. Given the limited supply of educational funds and the unlimited needs at all levels of education, there must be an expectation of an adequate "payoff" in the long run to justify this program.

Would it be more effective, one might ask, to run remedial programs at later levels of education such as the junior high school, than to create a whole new system of early education? Support for preschool programs for disadvantaged children comes from many sources. Its theoretical foundations can be found in the works of contemporary psychologists such as Piaget, Hebb, and Hunt. One of the most often quoted formulations is the recent work of Benjamin Bloom (1).

While no new original research is reported in *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*, Bloom has extended the interpretation of older studies in human development through combining and analyzing the cumulative data statistically. Bloom presents the proposition that environmental variations can have their greatest effect during periods of rapid change for that characteristic. He then sets about determining these periods of rapid change for selected characteristics including physi-

cal characteristics such as height, intelligence, school achievement, interests, attitudes, and personality.

In these areas of stable development, Bloom demonstrates that the early years are the periods of greatest growth; so that an individual develops half his height by age two and one-half, half his intelligence by age four, and half his general school achievement by the end of grade three. Bloom also suggests that environmental conditions have their greatest effect upon development during these early years of rapid change. While he does not state that change cannot take place at later stages of development, Bloom asserts that deprivation in these early years may cause irreversible harm, and a great deal more effort would have to be expended at later periods of development to effect modifications that could more easily be accomplished at earlier stages (1).

While the work of Bloom does not rest on a particular theory of intellectual development, it does parallel the theoretical formulations of Piaget, Hebb, and others. Hunt, who has attempted to synthesize the work of Piaget with the theoretical and empirical findings of other developmental and learning psychologists, has also suggested that the early years of development play a significant role in providing the generalized conceptual skills that are essential for later learning (3).

These works provide an apparent justification for a program of "massive intervention" for disadvantaged children. The argument is as follows: Many children are growing up lacking the experiences essential for optimum intellectual development and for success in school learning. These children could

best be helped through the provision of special educational programs early in life. Such programs, provided during the period of rapid intellectual development, can have a much greater effect than more extensive remedial programs provided later in the child's life.

Since this period of rapid intellectual development occurs before the child enters school, it is necessary for the school to reach downward in establishing new programs. The massive nature of the program stems from the large number of children to be helped. The concept of "intervention," not to be confused with "interference," suggests the modification of development in the human being through the addition of significant experiences in the child's life.

### **Should Society "Intervene"?**

This modification of early experiences has raised a series of moral issues. With certain major exceptions, organized society has generally interfered as little as possible with the development of individual citizens, especially in the early years of life. The compulsory school laws are one such exception. We require that each person's development be modified by participating in a series of prescribed opportunities to develop such skills as reading which are necessary for participation in the activities of the society.

We also find organized society making available certain developmental modifications voluntarily without requiring everyone to participate. The establishment of prenatal clinics and "well-baby" clinics are examples of such voluntary forms of intervention. The availability of medical services allows the young children to develop in

a different, and generally more optimal, way than if they were denied the benefit of such services.

Early educational opportunities could be provided to large numbers of disadvantaged children as a voluntary program or a required program, depending on how we conceive of the family and the responsibility that society should assume for the development of the individual. Does society meet its responsibility by *making available* the conditions for optimum growth or by *insuring* that each person partake of these conditions?

Bloom, in the volume already discussed, raises the issue of social responsibility for the development of children as follows:

If school dropouts, delinquent behavior, and frustration with the educational requirements of a society can be predicted long in advance, can we sit idly by and watch the prophecies come true? If remedial actions and therapy are less effective at later stages in the individual's development, can we satisfy a social conscience by indulging in such activities when it is far too late? (1, p. 231)

### **"Intervention" and Family Life**

Often the modification of one portion of a culture also modifies related portions. It has been suggested that the development of large scale programs of early education may have a detrimental effect on the structure of the family. The responsibility for child rearing, especially at the early stages of childhood, the argument goes, rests with the child's family. Stripping this responsibility from the family will undermine the family structure and may even alienate the young child from his parents. If such were the case, the advan-

tages to be gained by programs of early intervention might be offset by the damage done.

Throughout the history of early childhood education, critics of programs for young children have used such arguments in attacking the establishment of nursery programs. The facts, however, do not support the argument. Programs for young children have generally developed as an extension of the home experience. Evidence of home-school cooperation at this level of education abounds. The early kindergartens, for example, were organized with teachers working with the children in the morning, while the afternoons were set aside for parent programming. At this time the teacher could schedule parent conferences, home visits, and parent education programs. The extensive development of parent-cooperative nursery schools in working class as well as middle class communities is another example of strong family-school ties at the early childhood level.

In day care centers, where young children may spend the majority of waking hours in group programs, one can find strong support for the child's family life. Parent-teacher conferences are held regularly. Social workers are often available to help families with interpersonal problems. When the day care personnel cannot help a parent, referrals to appropriate agencies are made. The availability of day care programs allows mothers to work without feelings of guilt that may result from makeshift child-care arrangements.

A program of early intervention does not suggest the wresting of the child from the warm bosom of his family and his subsequent placement in a cold,

sterile, controlled environment. Rather it suggests the availability of resources to enable the families of the poor to meet the aspirations that they have for their own children. At its best, such a program means the equalization of educational opportunity in a very real sense, by providing the opportunities necessary for intellectual development in a warm, nurturing environment through interaction with emotionally supportive adults.

### **Environmental Manipulation?**

While the theoretical arguments provided by Bloom and others suggest that development can be maximized by environmental manipulation, they do not provide us with the guidelines for those changes we ought to be implementing.

Evidence of research studies in the past does not support the hypothesis that attendance in nursery schools will necessarily increase intelligence. The supporters of Montessori education, early reading instruction for preschoolers, and other such programs also lack evidence as to the effectiveness of their programs. A number of research and demonstration projects in early education of disadvantaged children are currently under way.

Most of these projects consist of traditional nursery education programs with some special modifications. Conclusive evidence as to their effectiveness has not yet been presented, although the evidence seems to suggest that early educational programs with intellectual content will allow the child to be more successful in kindergarten and early primary grades. Findings such as this were reviewed in an earlier article (5). At present this would sug-

gest that programs for young disadvantaged children ought to follow the guidelines set by conventional early childhood programs with modification to provide for the systematic development of cognitive skills and language skills.

A second issue raised by the possible extension of programs to large numbers of young disadvantaged children centers around the need for quality control. We need to provide programs of high quality, utilizing fully qualified teachers to direct such programs. The pupil-teacher ratio will have to differ significantly from elementary school standards. Effective programs for young disadvantaged children will be expensive. They will require large numbers of well-trained staff, working in good-sized, well-equipped rooms, and supported by a variety of auxiliary services. In the haste to establish mass programs, standards may be forgotten. There are not enough qualified early childhood teachers to meet an increase in demand. Public school buildings in depressed areas are generally overcrowded and will be hard-pressed to provide even a minimum of space for new prekindergarten programs. Cost-conscious administrators, attempting to stretch the tax dollar, may view the programs as wasteful and start cutting corners.

The danger in a massive program is that it may only look like one of the better pilot programs on the outside, while in reality the significant elements may have been so watered down that the program itself is ineffectual. If "massive intervention," that is, the creation of large numbers of effective programs for preschool disadvantaged children, is to provide any answer to the problems of educating the disadvantaged child, the programs need to be readily available, they need to be related to the parents of the children, and they need to be designed to provide appropriate opportunities for experience, while the quality of the programs is jealously guarded.

#### References

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