

## ● Letters to the Editor

Contributors: Carl Bereiter and  
Siegfried Engelmann;  
James L. Hymes, Jr.

### The Educator and the Child Developmentalist: Reply to a Review

Champaign, Illinois

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Sir:

James L. Hymes, Jr.'s review<sup>1</sup> of our book, *Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool*, was an articulate presentation of what we have come to call the "Child D" attitude toward our work. It is impossible to draw a sharp line between the child developmentalist "camp" and that of educators, since child development ideas pervade much educational thinking, but Dr. Hymes' views provide a clear illustration of ideas that we consider inimical to sound educational judgment.

One of the hallmarks of the child developmentalist's orientation to educational methods is "instant evaluation." Dr. Hymes urges, quite legitimately, that the methods proposed in our book need more extensive testing and evaluation. Yet he is able to state confidently, and with no research, that our methods are the ones that have been responsible for school dropouts and failures in the past. How does he know (a) that these are the same methods and (b) that these methods have been responsible for failure? Such facile judgments require the assumptions that (a) whatever methods look alike at a superficial glance are alike and that (b) whatever characteristics of a method are most striking at first glance are the ones that account for its success or failure. We trust that most school administrators will recognize this false omniscience as a grave occupational disease.

A second mark of the extreme "Child D" orientation is an utter disregard for the content of learning. How the child learns tells you all you need to know about what he learns. Thus, Dr. Hymes neglects even to mention the three-fourths of our book that is devoted to detailed curricula which break down and sequence impor-

<sup>1</sup>James L. Hymes, Jr. "Selected for Review." *Educational Leadership* 24 (5): 463-67; February 1967.

tant concepts and skills so that they can be mastered by disadvantaged children. He also ignores the achievement results relevant to these curricula—results that are well beyond “par for the course.”

A third and especially irksome characteristic of the “Child D” orientation is maudlin self-righteousness. We do not recall a child developmentalist’s ever objecting to an educational method simply on the grounds that it was ineffective. (To do so would, of course, expose all of their favored methods to a similar attack.) The objection always takes the line that the method is cruel or damaging, stifling or unnatural or simply that the children won’t like it. The “Child D” types never seem to doubt their ability to determine without investigation whether or not children will like a particular approach, or what the effects of an approach on a child’s personality and attitudes will be.

We did not know in advance that children would take to direct instruction with pleasure and satisfaction. In fact, we were amazed at the extent to which they did. We do not know whether our children will drop out of school at sixteen, but we do know that in the elementary school where their kindergarten class was held and where, as is typical, attendance in kindergarten was usually poorer than in higher grades, their kindergarten class had the best attendance record of any class in the school.

Child developmentalists could play a useful role in education by watching for and investigating the unintended consequences of educational practices. To perform this role creditably, however, they need to acquire a much better understanding of *intended* consequences; i.e., substantive achievement, skill development, conceptual mastery, etc. Lacking this understanding, they tend to treat all of these as unimportant and thus miss the point of most educational issues. IQ gains, for instance, are probably best treated as incidental and quite possibly insignificant consequences of educational efforts. (One year we get IQ gains of 7 points, the next year gains of 17 points, with no corresponding difference in substantive achievement.)

They need to acquire an understanding of the structure and sequence of teaching presentations and not merely categorize them on the basis of superficial impression or the number of times the teacher does thus-and-so. They need to develop ways of assessing unintended consequences rather than merely presuming what they will be on the basis of personal conviction. Finally, they need to realize that they do not have a monopoly on virtue and on concern for child welfare, that there are others equally devoted to child welfare who see things differently and that these differences ought to be treated with toleration until they can be settled with facts.

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## Response by the Reviewer

College Park, Maryland

Dear Editor:

One of my criticisms of the Bereiter-Engelmann book was its "lumping" of all disadvantaged children, its ignoring of individual differences. I fear this must be a characteristic of the authors as I read now of a new lumping: This mysterious "Child D attitude" and the "child developmentalist 'camp.'"

Since I also took them to task for their unseemly hurry for national, popular publication, I hope I too am not guilty of "instant evaluation." Bereiter and Engelmann do not quote me accurately, however. I only said: "Many of the suggestions *sound like* the very procedures that have in the past been responsible for dropouts, for lack of interest in learning, for loss of self-respect, for alienation from society." My cautious statement, supported by many accurate quotations from their book, was a part of my reminder to them that they still have a lot of work to do, work which I thought should have been done before they rushed into print.

As for "maudlin self-righteousness," I must restate that I felt the book unusually harsh, callous, insensitive. In so doing, I do not speak for any "camp," although I am sure many readers will agree with me; least of all do I claim to have a monopoly on virtue and on concern for child welfare. I simply say: I do not see much of this concern in the Bereiter-Engelmann book.

This point has its bearing on another part of their reply: my—not "the camp's"—alleged utter disregard for the content of learning. I have no such disregard, nor could any educator have. Yet I do find it harder than they, evidently, to separate means and ends, and I find it especially hard to accept the notion that the ends justify the means. I also find it very outdated to talk of "intended consequences" in terms of learning *per se*, rather than in terms of the kind of human who develops as a result of his learning. It also seems naive to me to believe that the adult's "intended consequences," no matter how narrow, are all a child learns. For these reasons—ethical, psychological, educational—I cannot go along with the view that methods that are "cruel" or "damaging" or "stifling" or "unnatural" are excused by the content.

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