



Beyond "Sesame Street": TV and Preschoolers

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INTENSE concern and activity currently surround the development of programs for preschool children. This interest has emerged through the formulation of two distinct, but convergent propositions:

1. Environmental influences have their greatest impact on the intellectual development of children prior to their entrance into formal schooling, and

2. The early development and consequent school performance of preschool children from so-called "disadvantaged" homes are suppressed through the deprived conditions indigenous to poverty and or ethnic-racial discrimination.

The acceptance of both of these assumptions has initiated a large number of enterprises designed to improve the quality of the preschooler's learning environment. Of particular significance is the \$1.6 billion federal investment in Head Start programs for 3.5 million "disadvantaged" preschoolers. Yet, it has been estimated that a traditionally designed program for all four-year-olds alone would cost \$2.75 billion. The contemplation of such costs has stimulated the exploration of new means and combinations of resources which would be both effective in reaching preschoolers, and yet less expensive than the customary instructional systems.

Until this past year one of the most obvious, yet relatively untouched, media for teaching preschoolers was television. It has

been estimated that 95 percent of American homes have TV sets. Furthermore, it has been calculated that a very high percentage of the 12 million preschoolers between the ages of three and five spend 50-plus hours a week in front of television sets, accumulating a total of 9,000 hours of viewing prior to their entrance into the classroom. Inspired by such potential influence, a vanguard in the investigation of television as a teaching instrument for preschoolers sallied forth this past year in the form of "Sesame Street."

The "Sesame Street" Venture

The immediate success and high acclaim for "Sesame Street" by the pros and the audience were punctuated by its selection for the Peabody Award for the "best children's show" as well as its attainment of a Nielsen rating that claims an audience of six to seven million preschoolers—half the U.S. population of three-, four-, and five-year-olds. The program's broad exposure was also accentuated

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by the fact that it was beamed for one hour on weekdays for 26 weeks through 200 commercial and noncommercial outlets.

"Sesame Street" was conceived in 1968 by Lloyd Morrisett, then Vice-President of Carnegie Corporation, and Joan Cooney, who had just rebounded from an Emmy Award-winning TV documentary on poverty. A consolidation of grants from federal agencies, Ford, Carnegie, and the Markle Corporation, totaling \$8 million, enabled the originators to set up Children's Television Workshop (CTW), which has since withdrawn from National Educational Television to become a nonprofit corporation.

Through the efforts of Edward Palmer, research director for CTW, systematic attempts have been made in both the development and evaluation phases of the program to determine the unique elements that the television medium contains as a potential teaching instrument for preschoolers. Taking a cue from the preschoolers' fascination for commercials, Dr. Palmer made a careful analysis of reactions to television episodes to isolate those factors which capture their sustained interest.

The combined results of this probe were then used to construct the now-familiar "laugh-in" type format of "Sesame Street," which utilizes novelty, variety, and lively delivery to captivate the attention and responsiveness of preschoolers. Through rapidly fired episodes containing either animated cartoons, puppetry, or comments from friendly children and adults, the young child is exposed to counting, the alphabet, situations requiring reasoning and problem solving, as well as short ventures to examine various aspects of his physical or social environment—all of which are considered important requisites for success in the early years of school.

CTW last year distributed six million copies of its "Parent Teacher Guide" in an attempt to extend learning beyond the immediate effects of the exposure to the screen. The "Guide" details a number of activities which can be carried out by teachers or parents as an extension and reinforcement to the program's objectives.

Amid the high acclaim and excitement over the initial success of "Sesame Street" and in anticipation of the Educational Testing Service's objective analysis of its effectiveness, voices of caution and skepticism can be heard. There is a feeling that "Sesame Street" may actually widen the differences between the "advantaged" and the "disadvantaged" in terms of readiness for school. Others feel that the program will effect only minute gains in ability because of the limitations that television faces in relation to other important factors in the early learning equation.

However, of greater significance from a longitudinal standpoint will be the measure of "Sesame's" sustained and cumulative effect on preschool learners as a component or complement to other types of programs. The experience of Head Start programs, which have indicated the necessity of parental involvement and reinforcement to sustain ability gains, would seem to loom heavy as an important consideration in evaluating the promise and determining the direction for expanding television as a teaching tool for preschoolers.

"Sesame"—An Organizer for Community Activities

Some persons recognized a need for stimulating activities to back up "Sesame Street" content and also to take advantage of the broader implications that the program might have for preschool education. As a consequence, the Gary-Purdue EPDA Institute in Early Childhood Education¹ initiated a community-centered project in preschool education. Activities involving "Sesame" and its follow-up activities were used as an organizing factor to develop several nuclei of home-based satellite learning centers for three-year-old children.

Under the direction of Bennie Mae Collins, assisted by community consultants Evangeline Morse and Patsy Merryweather, the participation of 20 parents was elicited.

¹ U.S. Office of Education-EPDA Institute in Early Childhood Education, Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana. Project Number 241140.



Photo courtesy of the authors

Parents begin to develop confidence in their ability to help their children learn.

These parents' preschool children did not attend established nursery schools. Aside from developing the groundwork for satellite learning centers, the purpose of the project was to encourage participation in the "Sesame Street" adventure and to demonstrate experiences and activities appropriate for preschool children which could, in turn, be used by mother-participants in working with their own children. More specifically, the objectives of the program were:

1. To emphasize the importance of viable parental-child involvement and interaction during the preschool years
2. To evaluate and interpret commercial and standard educational materials for preschool children in terms that are usable in our community and adaptable for use in other low-income areas
3. To help parents become more adept in developing communication skills with preschoolers
4. To help parents become more innovative in using their own skills to develop creative learning tools

5. To help parents develop self-confidence in their ability to help their children learn
6. To develop a toy-lending library
7. To introduce the use of the public library for preschoolers.

Goals for children are focused around acceptance and achievement. Parents were urged to remember that each child will learn and remember different things from each "Sesame Street" program.

The program activities included monthly meetings of the total group supplemented by interim meetings of smaller planning and work groups. Weekly home contacts were made by the staff to encourage participation and to make and/or demonstrate suggestions for activities that parents might use with their children. Total group meetings were highlighted by discussion of the follow-up activities and preparation of the materials suggested in the "Sesame Parent/Teacher Guides." Through the resources of the institute, crayons, paper, scissors, and manipulative objects, not usually available in low-

income homes, were supplied for use in the follow-up activities.

One of the important spin-offs of the group meetings was the adaptation of both materials and activities suggested in the "Guide." Members of the project in many cases found that the suggestions detailed in the "Guide" were unrealistic and required modification in terms of the resources of low-income families. One example is the activity that required churning a quart of cream in the process of making butter. Such adaptations were culminated in the development of an alphabet illustrated with physical referents more familiar to the children of the community.

The immediate impact of the project was to expand the knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm of the parent-participants in working with preschoolers. Yet, in the broader sense, the activities of the project with its emphasis on planning and organization, including correspondence with congressmen, helped to develop a pool of indigenous community leaders, initiated a nucleus of home-based preschool learning centers, and established a vehicle for community political action.

The Future

The particular use of "Sesame Street" as described in the Sesame Community Project is only one example of attempts to integrate the unique facets of the television medium into a more comprehensive framework of preschool education. Once isolated, the distinctive elements of television as a learning tool must be evaluated and related within the context of an array of other important factors which influence the early development of children. Such things as the active manipulation of materials, the need for feedback and reinforcement, and the interactions between child and adult are only a few of the significant factors which also make important contributions to early learning and development.

Although the "Sesame Street" format has proved to be highly motivating and capable of eliciting both the participation and the responsiveness of preschoolers, it is at

present an "uncontrollable" medium in the sense that it is an unmanipulative environment from the child's standpoint. The significance of the manipulative aspect of learning environments, whether they require separate or coordinated psychomotor, verbal, cognitive, or emotional transactions, must not be overlooked. The manipulative aspect plays a part in helping the child develop a sense of internal locus of control while obtaining reinforcements as a consequence of the awareness of his role in such transactions.

Even with such notes of caution, one must yet look forward with intense interest and anticipation to an experiment like "Sesame Street," not only for its role in outlining the teaching potential of television, but also in terms of its total impact in changing traditional conceptions and modes of instruction. The child who has been "turned on" by "Sesame Street's" Gordon and others, amusing puppetry, and flashing exposures to numerals and letters may quickly "turn off" in environments barren of stimulating artifacts, impregnated with the monotonous drone of adult prescription and direction.

Finally, one cannot afford to avoid the recent challenge of former HEW Secretary John Gardner, who maintains that,

Technological breakthroughs like "Sesame Street" are the only hope for a radical upgrading of educational quality on a massive scale. Anyone who doesn't recognize these breakthroughs as the first limping troops, the vanguard, of a mighty host is just out of touch.²

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²"TV's Switched-On School." *Newsweek* 75 (22): 70; June 1, 1970.

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