



3. Analyzing Early Childhood

DECISIONS about instructional methods and procedures to be employed in early childhood programs are made on the basis of explicit and implicit objectives and basic assumptions regarding the nature of human learning and development. There is also a good deal of habit and tradition involved.

The organization, structuring, and sequencing of such variables as available materials and equipment, the activities of both children and adults, and available time and space are all components of what may be called instructional procedures. Also involved are questions of how time and space are to be utilized, what materials are selected for use, who selects materials, and who determines their use. The amount of individualization of the program, taking into account individual differences in children, is also a variable.

The various dimensions of instructional procedures are, of course, interdependent, and their division into arbitrary categories is done simply to give the reader some handles to use in grasping the characteristics of a program. In sponsors' descriptions of their programs, some dimensions tend to get stressed, sometimes to the exclusion of others. Since all programs have to do *something* within each dimension, it becomes quite important to find out what that some-

thing is—even to the point of making site visits to see the programs in action.

Materials, Equipment, and Activities

The essence of any program is to be found in what the children enrolled in it actually do: in the patterns of activities in which they engage from day to day, and the materials, equipment, and the people involved in these patterns of activity. There is an integral relationship between the materials and equipment available and the activities which take place. For the purpose of this discussion, these variables are considered as a functional whole. The selection of a program for early education involves choices of materials as well as determination of how these materials are to be used.

Materials can be chosen because they are designed for sequential learning (for example, programmed instruction) or are "self-correcting" (as with the Montessori materials). Materials can be included that are intended to encourage children to explore, to discover, to invent, and/or to create. They can be selected also because they help children organize their ideas about the wider world around them (for example, housekeeping equipment or naturalistic items such as seashells and plants).

Some materials lend themselves to pupil

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use with a minimum of adult help, while other materials require substantial adult supervision. Some are specifically designed for optimum use by either a group or an individual, while others are best used one way or the other. Here again the reader should consider which views of learning and development would lead to which choices of materials and to what uses for them.

Teacher, Staff, Adult Roles

The teacher (or staff) is a key element in the organization and use of materials. Teachers must understand the concepts and principles behind the learning opportunities presented. To cite one example, teachers long established in deductive approaches may turn materials intended to encourage children to explore, to invent, to discover, and to create into objects of rote response. If a program for early education is to include materials which stress inductive processes, teachers will often need a great deal of help in understanding the underlying assumptions and concepts of the materials.

There are two extreme views of the teacher role which correspond to the typical pedagogical interpretations that have been made of the behaviorist-environmental and normative-maturational views of learning and development. At one extreme, the

teacher (or adult) is seen as the chief source of important knowledge which she/he dispenses to children in measured doses accompanied by rewards for correct pupil responses. The knowledge content may be presented as group lessons, or children may be offered a variety of opportunities to make desired responses and may be rewarded when they make these responses.

On the other end of the continuum, the setting may be very similar (that is, lessons or free play) but the teacher role is a less active one. Since the students are assumed (a) to have the main basis for knowledge within them, and (b) to be able readily to assimilate any material for which they are maturationally ready, there is less need for direct reinforcement of individual responses and more general support is given for each child's (or group's) overall work and progress. The teacher (adult) serves mainly to make sure that the children have access to the information and skills for which they are currently ready.

Somewhere between these extremes, there is a vast set of role variations. The teacher (adult) may be a presenter of chal-

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lenges and problems to solve, a model for inquiry or language, a guide in exploration and an expert source of needed information and leads, or a source of interpersonal support and a group leader.

Use of Space and Time

Arrangements of space make a statement to children about its use and what is to take place within it. Implicitly or explicitly the kinds of relationships among adults in the school, among adults who participate directly in the children's learning, between adults and children, and among the children themselves can be strongly influenced by such arrangements. Likewise the relationships between children and the available materials and equipment are at least implied by the ways in which space is structured; while the ways in which teachers expect children to be engaged in learning are evident in the continuity and change in the use of space. In short, the physical layout and its boundaries are relevant considerations in planning and selecting an early education program.

The following are descriptions of ways, reflecting a variety of views about learning and young children, in which space may be utilized.

1. One room may have areas differentiated for specific activities and materials to be used. Often furniture is fixed into place. Children and teacher(s) move back and forth among these areas.

2. One room may have areas differentiated for specific activities and materials to be used. Furniture and divisions are flexible and change over time. Children and teacher(s) move back and forth among these areas.

3. The learning environment may involve a number of rooms, with each room differentiated for specific materials and activities. An adult remains in one area and the children move through or back and forth. The number of children accommodated by such staff and space is usually large.

4. Outside space may be utilized as an integral part of the learning environment or as a relief from learning.

5. The usable space may extend outside the classroom(s) into neighboring classrooms, hallways, library, outdoors, and into the wider community. The arrangement of the space is largely determined by the curriculum and the involvement of the children at a particular time.

6. Space may not be a part of the school setting and its organization may have to be used as it exists, as in a program in which a teacher goes into the home to teach children and/or parents.

Decisions regarding the length of the school day or year may be based on the particular program's goals or on first priorities within those goals. Traditionally, such decisions have often reflected factors other than the program objectives, or the conditions for learning, for example, availability of money, facilities, or precedent. The bases for decisions regarding the length of the school day or year can be made explicit and may or may not allow for modification compatible with the educational goals.

In the most general sense, time is a "given" to be used in ways most productive for children's learning. The schedule for the day, the week, or the year defines the use of this time. The use of time may be determined by the curriculum guide, the supervisor, the principal, the teacher, the child, or a combination of these factors.

Following are some examples of how time may be structured for learning:

1. A highly specific, predetermined daily, weekly, or monthly time schedule which outlines activities in time, as well as time of transitions. Usually dependent on teacher direction.

2. A highly specific, predetermined daily, weekly, or monthly schedule which allows for flexibility within specific blocks of time as the day and/or week evolves. Usually dependent on teacher direction except with specific blocks of time.

3. Blocks of time highly specific and used in predetermined way for specific goals. Transition times defined and blocks of time allowing for flexibility. A combination of highly structured activities and independent activity.

4. Schedules which evolve on the basis of children's interest and involvement. Such a schedule may revolve around such "givens" as

arrival, lunch, dismissal, or the availability of special staff or facilities.

Provisions for Individual Differences

When selecting a model or developing a program in early education, a relevant question to ask is what provisions are made, or can be made, for individual differences in children. Some dimensions to consider are developmental levels, learning styles, and experiential background of the children. How much are these dimensions provided for by the learning opportunities which take place?

A program may be characterized by the amount of time given to each of the following:

1. Learning opportunities which have a low floor and high ceiling with the expectation that children can choose to engage in activities appropriate to their own developmental level and to their own learning rate
2. Learning opportunities which are highly differentiated and tailored by the staff to the experience and developmental level of specific children
3. Learning opportunities which are the same for all, with the same behavioral outcomes expected for all.

Related to the three points given here, the nature and extent of teacher-pupil interaction may be considered an important variable regarding individuation. In and of itself, the amount of teacher-pupil interaction does not account for individuation; however, the nature of the interaction may reflect the program's point of view about learning.

In addition, a program's provisions for individuation may be characterized by information about:

1. Sources of choice of the children's activities and materials (by child or children, by teacher, or prescription by specialists)
2. Materials and equipment and other sources of experience utilized or available for learning
3. Organization of children: homogeneous groups (age, achievement, social maturity, experience, learning style, pace, or interest); grouping by multiple criteria
4. Provisions for tutoring at school or in the home.

Grouping can be an important strategy in creating conditions which support cognition as well as affect. Children working together who can serve as models and stimulators for each other in a variety of learning tasks can extend both capacity to learn and scope of learning. Grouping which takes into account differences rather than similarities can support and dignify individuality. Such grouping can provide a setting in which motivation is strengthened, in which learning is invested with value, and in which human potential is released.

Another topic bears on program procedures and, especially, on provisions for individual differences in this regard. This topic is the aspect of evaluation that involves the initial and continuing assessment of children's developmental status as part of the process of planning instruction for them. Evaluation will be taken up in Part 3D.

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