

The Preschooling of Childhood

Most childcare centers deprive children of what they need most to grow—opportunities to play, interact freely, experiment, and discover who they are.

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During the past two decades, the structure of the family and workplace has been altered radically. As increasing numbers of women have entered the labor market, the early lives of young children have changed too. Yet neither the federal government nor the state legislatures have seen fit to establish a comprehensive childcare system that takes account of both the needs of working parents and the needs and special vulnerabilities of young children.

Since 1971, when the Mondale-Brademas Comprehensive Child Devel-

opment Act was vetoed by President Nixon, the dearth of commitment and lack of national responsibility for the quality of life for young children has created untold hardships and stress for the families of the unemployed, the working poor, and even the middle class. The U.S. has one of the most

underdeveloped systems of childcare in the western world.

Because no comprehensive childcare policy exists, because the issue of daycare is so ideologically charged, because the patriarchal "mother-stay-at-home" attitude is still so prevalent among our predominantly male legislators, our ability to critically address the defects and the social-psychological consequences of an appallingly deficient childcare system becomes clouded by political agendas.

According to the 1980 census, there are 7.5 million preschool children, 40

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percent under the age of three, with mothers in the labor force. Almost a million of these children attend daycare centers.¹ Children as young as 18 months may spend 30 to 50 hours a week in childcare centers, where socialization patterns are prematurely transferred from the family to the preschool institution,² which in turn mirrors the values of the public schools.

What is life really like in our preschools? The following ethnographic observations are drawn from a two-year field study I conducted of different childcare centers in the Midwest—including a traditional nursery school, a Montessori preschool, a “free” preschool, a federally funded low-income daycare center, and a profit-run daycare franchise.

At Lollipop Learning Centers, Inc., a large profit-run daycare chain, one of the most effective containment instruments was the TV set.

Both daycare groups spent morning and afternoon periods in the TV room each day during fall and winter. During November, I walked into the TV room after the aide unlocked the door. I found the room cold and bare. Twenty-five children lay on the bare floor in the darkened room watching *Sesame Street*. There was a high noise level, which tended to obscure the high volume of the TV set. After a few minutes of viewing, children began to run around, shout, scream, and hit each other. The one aide supervising the children stood at the back of the room, seemingly impervious to the chaotic situation. I noticed that two children were screaming hard and that their screams drowned the sounds of the program. After almost a half hour, the aide looked at her watch and shouted, “Time to move on.” She walked up to the TV, switched it off abruptly with no warning, and marched the children out to the art room.

During an afternoon visit to the wooden block room I observed the male assistant teacher sitting at a table tapping a tune with his fingers, amidst an almost deafening uproar. After a few minutes he stood up and walked around. One child, Jack, sat on a large wooden truck and tried to ride it. Teacher: “Hey, I told you not to sit on it; leave the room.” The child began to cry and lay down. Teacher to another child: “Well, I guess Jack’s dead; you can have his blocks now!”³

When the staff aides attempted to “teach” the children, much of what they taught was crudely inapplicable to their developmental level and did not

capture their interest. Each day stories with a “cognitive” lesson were read to the children. The aides could not read fluently—some could not read at all—but the children were required to sit still and keep quiet.

“Now I want you all to keep your mouths closed while I’m reading the story.” The aide proceeded to read a book about apples and corresponding numbers. No participation by the children was invited and questions were silenced. The children fidgeted and ran around; and within a few minutes, fighting and screaming broke out.

On another occasion, one aide attempted to read a book while two others patrolled the room, which was in near chaos. Two children were hitting each other, two were screaming, and three or four were running around trying to escape the aide. The following material was read by the aide. She showed the children a picture of a coffee pot adjacent to a drum and asked, “Is the coffee pot a drum?” No one answered. The aide replied: “No. Is this (pointing to a drum) a drum? Yes. Why? Because he pounds on it. Is a house a parkbench? No. Why? Because you can’t sit on it. Buttered toast is not a toy. Do you think it is a toy? No. Why? Because you can’t play with it.”⁴

The above conversation was conducted entirely as a monologue in which the aide both asked and responded to her own absurd questions. It appeared that the “lesson” was designed to teach children to discriminate objects by their function and to label correctly. The children were coerced to obey, to become passive recipients of the “lesson.”

During the time allotted to the art and project room, the production of artifacts dominated the “work” of the classroom. No attention was paid to the child’s involvement in the process of doing. On a number of occasions I observed the aides making elaborate turkeys (Thanksgiving), pumpkins (Halloween), and so on, while the children were given busy work, such as drawing or molding clay, to occupy them. Each teacher-produced artifact would be labeled with the name of a child, who would usually be called up to add a token finishing touch. Then the product would be sent home or used to adorn the corridor.

In such an environment, much of the day was spent containing the children, keeping them occupied and docile, while the staff made the projects,

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marched large groups of children in line from room to room, punished rebellious behavior, and rewarded conformity.

Another set of ethnographic observations portrays toddlers at work in a qualitatively different environment:

At the Montessori Center, two-year-old Molly would not sit still. She jumped up and down and was taken onto Teacher Jackie's lap and held in a viselike grip. She cried, kicked, and squealed, and the "Hunter Song" was interrupted to the annoyance of the teachers. Teacher Jackie then let go, and she ran to take a book from the chair. Teacher Jackie removed the book and pulled her back on her lap, and the protest was repeated. Teacher Jackie then asked Teacher Marian to call the name cards. Molly's name was called last.

After resisting circle time for well over a week, Molly was "left alone" by the teachers as a new tactic. Unseen by the staff, she took off her shoes and socks and spent 15 minutes absorbed in drawing pictures on her fingers and toes. She utilized different colors of chalk, tried to erase the chalk with an eraser, and did not utter a word. When Teacher Jackie turned around and noticed what Molly was doing, she grabbed the chalk from her saying, "You don't draw on feet. Chalk is for the chalk board. You don't take your shoes and socks off in class." When Molly's chalk was removed, she screamed and kicked and threw herself on the floor.⁵

Twenty-two-month-old Jomo overturned the trash can and pulled out the soiled kleenex. He laughed uproariously, and Kyle and Sandi ran to join him. Teacher Jackie hurried over and said, "Did you have an accident, Jomo?" (I perceived his action as intentional.) She sent Jomo off to get "new work." He ran around the table to the kleenex box and laughed, pulling out one clean tissue after another. Teacher Jackie: "No Jomo, no. This is for blowing our noses."

Jomo ran to the door, which was kept closed, and opened it. Two children followed him. He banged the door shut and laughed. Anthony and Pete followed suit, and within seconds the three had created a commotion. Teacher Jackie: "Come in and close the door." Jomo banged it loudly and laughed, running off. Teacher Jackie to Teacher Marian: "Get Jomo work to do and spend time with him—I'll take care of the rest of the class." Teacher Marian led Jomo away, muttering, "Has he been measured yet?"⁶

Historically, the schools have always been guardians of economic and political stability, geared to the reproduction of the social order, where productivity, competitiveness, and the work ethic are taught.

Now the preschool has become a training ground for the early acculturation and subsequent containment of its students.

What happens when the worst excesses of this containment are brought down to the very young, coinciding with a critical phase of life dependency and identity formation? How do young children develop a sense of self, a feeling of security and trust in the world, when they spend their days in a center like Lollipop, Inc.? How do two-year-olds internalize the regimentation of procedures, the circumscribing of their curiosity, the codes of silence, the compulsion to produce artifacts, and the redirection and recategorization of their activity as "work" rather than play?

The separation that the adult world imposes on work and play and the demarcation of these activities into specific contexts is not part of the existential structure of childhood. Work, in the adult world, is defined by particular spatial and temporal boundaries and linked to the productive functions of the marketplace in a capitalist technocracy. Play, too, as adults define it, takes place in specific spatial and temporal frameworks and is highly organized and hierarchically structured so that even "recreation" and "leisure" have become sciences and industries with corresponding experts in the technology of "play."

But young children do not view the world like that, at least not until they are "taught" to do so. Consider the narrative about Molly, "playing" with chalk and writing on her fingers and toes. No doubt she was experimenting with the multifaceted possibilities of chalk and an eraser, generalizing functionally, as two-year-olds tend to do, from one category of objects to another. Her experiential play was directed not to conformity (chalk is for blackboards only) but to discovery. Hence she, like Jomo and many others in that Montessori preschool, became "deviants," subverters of the social order who threaten to disrupt institutional equilibrium.

In such contexts the "preschooling" of childhood emerges as an effective training ground for conformity, docility, obedience, and acceptance of hierarchy, all central features of a bureaucrat-

ic milieu. Play, which is fundamental to the social, cognitive, and emotional development of every child, becomes deviant within such a structure.

The dominant ideology of much of early childhood education, with its reading readiness at age three, results in inappropriate and deficient experiences for children. Flexible environments, experimental manipulation of materials, free space (metaphorical and physical) for interactive, noisy, fantasy play is vital for later learning and development. Play is not wasted time, nor is "wonder in the face of the world."

Our childcare centers have become containment centers and our teachers are being trained as time management experts. If control and productivity are our objectives, then let us not speak of early childhood education. For as long as a work ethic dominates the way we think about children's learning—as long as the school rather than the informal home context is the image orienting the social organization of preschools—we will continue to impose alienating adult agendas on the lives of young children.

As Piaget stated so wisely, "Every time one teaches a child, one prevents him from inventing or discovering."⁷ If we spent more time being child-watchers instead of child-"teachers," we could learn a great deal from children about how to develop programs and design curricula to meet their developmental and existential needs. Eroding the play-life of early childhood has severe educational implications for the children we attempt to "school" in later years. □

¹Many of the other 6.5 million are in family daycare homes (small, informal settings); many are left alone; and many are cared for by friends and relatives.

²"Preschool" refers to a broad range of childcare alternatives: the part-day nursery program, full-time daycare, as well as various accredited programs such as Montessori.

³Valerie Polakow Suransky, *The Erosion of Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 112.

⁴Suransky, p. 123.

⁵Suransky, p. 88.

⁶Suransky, p. 91.

⁷Jean-Claude Bringuier, *Conversations with Jean Piaget* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

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