

A Privileged Class

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Visiting a Russian kindergarten in the 1970s I was told by the school principal, "Our nation has no privileged class—except our children." It would be nice if that were true of Soviet society, and of our own. Russian children are treated very well, as are many American children. But in the United States, one fourth of all children—more than any other age group—live in poverty,¹ and fewer of them attend early education programs than children from advantaged homes.² Our public policies have been failing to recognize that investment in the very young would pay off in a better quality of national life a generation from now.

But that may be changing. Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who is well into a major study of early childhood education comparable to his influential *High School*,³ is already calling for more school programs for children at risk.⁴ And in late summer the National Governor's Conference declared early schooling for disadvantaged children one of their priorities.⁵ Several urban school systems, including Milwaukee and Buffalo, have already established large programs for four-year-olds.

The reasons for the growing interest in early education seem clear: changes in society make it necessary to re-evaluate the role of public schools in the education and care of "preschool" children. At the same time, policymakers are looking for ways to upgrade school performance, and data from several sources tell them that sound programs for four-, five-, and six-year-olds may be the most cost-effective investment (Weikart and Schweinhart, p. 4).

For educators these developments, while encouraging, raise many questions. What about middle-class children, who may be readier to benefit from formal schooling; should public schools provide for them as well? If so, who pays? Can children from very different backgrounds profit equally from the same kinds of programs, or

are some forms of instruction more appropriate for some types of children—the poor, for example—than others? If so, is it right to socially segregate children at such an early age?

Across the country venturesome schools are including more academic instruction in kindergarten, and are establishing junior kindergartens, transition rooms, and so on for not-ready children. Many of the experts on young children, however, such as David Weikart and Lawrence Schweinhart (p. 4), David Elkind (p. 36), and Barbara Day (p. 28), have serious reservations about these practices.

Day, for example, recognizes the dilemmas faced by administrators, but she recommends providing for developmental differences within a heterogeneous classroom. And she knows it can be done, because she helped design a model program in the Chapel Hill schools and has conducted research documenting effectiveness of the approach (p. 24).

The kind of programs that Day, Schweinhart, and others advocate require adequate resources, including qualified staff. In the practical world, educators must do the best they can with what they have. Nevertheless, while young children should perhaps not be given special privileges, they do deserve an even break.

1. Bureau of the Census, U. S. Dept. of Commerce, "Money, Income, and Poverty Status of Families and Persons in the U.S.: 1985," Consumer Income Series P-60, No. 154 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 3.

2. David Weikart and Lawrence Schweinhart, this issue, p. 4.

3. Ernest Boyer, *High School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

4. Ernest Boyer, "The Early Years and the Nation's Future," speech to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 4 September 1986.

5. *Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association, 1986).

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