On Early Education: A Conversation with Barbara Day

Former ASCD president Barbara Day is a nationally recognized author and consultant on early education. She knows the pressures that lead educators to establish transition rooms, junior kindergartens, and similar special programs, but she recommends a different way of providing for “not ready” students.

You see educators all over the country who are concerned about early education. What are some of the issues they’re wrestling with?

One of the largest issues is whether to begin offering programs for younger children in the public schools. This, of course, is a societal issue as well as an educational one. A second is whether kindergarten programs should be full-day, half-day, or alternate days.

Related to that is, if children don’t do well in kindergarten, should they move into a regular first grade or into a transitional classroom? If by the end of kindergarten a child hasn’t completed the requirements for that age group, the child must either go into regular first grade anyway, repeat kindergarten, or move into a transitional classroom. A pattern emerging in some areas of the country is the transitional classroom, which means that developmentally delayed children are placed in a homogeneous group. Now, I am opposed to that. I don’t want four-, five-, and six-year-old children categorized as failures.

But there must be an argument for it if it’s being done more widely?

The argument goes something like this: Picture a child—very often a little boy—who is small in stature, emotionally insecure, and who—perhaps because of his home situation—is simply not a social little being, he doesn’t have a lot of verbal and social skills. As a consultant, I’m often asked what I would recommend: should a child like that move on to a first grade classroom where, in this particular instance, instruction is very formal and where that child is going to be absolutely frustrated, or should the child be placed in a setting where he is developmentally capable of happy, successful learning? That’s a hard question to answer.

Now, the problem is not where the child is developmentally; it’s perfectly appropriate that a child should be at this particular stage in his or her life. Our challenge as educators is to provide a program based on the child’s needs and in tune with his or her individual development. So I say there are some alternatives, such as a total, child-centered early childhood program, meaning birth through about age nine. It should be ungraded, experiential, and developmental in nature. In such a program, children work at whatever developmental level they are capable of, and we simply do not say that every child must pass through neat packages of graded subject matter whether he or she is ready or not.

A second thing I recommend to school districts is—and we’re having problems with this due to funding—instead of segregating these children who are so-called “developmentally delayed” or “presumed unable to meet the competencies of a particular grade,” give them more opportunities for growth. I’m recommending that school systems assess these children and set up an eight-week summer school at the beginning of kindergarten or a program for four-year-old children if one is available, and that they do this every summer thereafter for the next several years. My hypothesis is that by about third grade, those children will have caught up. They simply need a little more time to grow, physically and socially as well as cognitively.

They would be with other children during the regular school year, but in a special program during the summer when the other children don’t attend school?

Well, they might be, but—because I’m an advocate of quality care for children of all developmental levels—I believe strongly that schools should be open in the summer to all children
who want to attend enrichment classes. So the children who are developmentally delayed would have time to work on the kinds of remedial skills that they need, but they would also be involved with the other children in the enrichment activities. I wouldn't want this summer program to be a burden and categorized as remedial only. I'd want it to be something that children look forward to attending. Art, dramatic play, dance, and language development opportunities should be provided; that's the way school should be for young children all the time. Specific skills in reading, writing, and math should be integrated throughout the day and approached from a child-centered view.

From an administrator's standpoint there are lots of problems to getting a program like that. Funding, organization, training.

There are, but creative administrators can do it. Chapter 1 funds can be used for the children who need them. Additional scholarships should be available, and many working mothers and fathers will pay whatever is necessary for children to attend enrichment programs during the summer.

Does what you're describing actually exist anywhere?

Well, Chapel Hill is an example. I chair the advisory council for the Chapel Hill Community Schools that plans all the enrichment activities for children in the regular school year and during the summer. My daughter, Susan, can leave her elementary school on Thursday afternoon, ride the school bus to another school in the same town, and attend violin classes. Other children can leave their elementary schools and go to classes on poetry, storytelling, bread-making, math games, and so on.

That's what I want to be happening in the summer. In North Carolina we have new legislation providing that, beginning with second grade and designated grades thereafter, any child who falls below a certain level on standardized achievement tests must go to summer school. I think that's wonderful; those children should have those kinds of opportunities, but I don't want children who go to school in the summer branded as "You've got to go to summer school because you've failed." I want to see the schools offer enrichment classes so other children are involved as well. For example, this last summer my daughter went to a public school in Chapel Hill for five weeks of special art activities. Other elementary children attended classes in theatre, dance, computers, and so on.

You don't have research evidence at this point that the kind of program you recommend would produce the results you predict?

No, but I do have an "educated opinion" based on several years of research on young children. It would make a wonderful research project.

Let's talk about a different use of screening tests. We hear a lot about tests being used to find out whether children are ready to attend school. If they can't pass the "entrance exam," their parents are encouraged to keep them home another year. Is very much of that going on?

That is a very questionable practice, and, yes, there is some of it going on. I have to present both sides of the issue. First of all, I believe in evaluating children to see where they are developmentally. The real concern is what we do with that information. I believe it should be considered a diagnostic process, not an entrance exam. But let me represent the other side of the issue. I've had teachers say to me about a given child, "But Professor Day, I can assure you that if that child comes into my classroom as he is right now, he will not be able to meet the minimum competencies of the kindergarten." And that prediction might be very accurate. So which is better? For that child to go to kindergarten and fail, or to say to the parent, "I think your child needs one more year to grow and develop."

Of course, neither of these answers, in my opinion, is the right one. The right answer is that child absolutely should come into kindergarten and have a wonderful developmental program. A child like that needs the program more than a five-year-old who might be able to read on a third- or fourth-grade level.

I am also very concerned about the impact it has on a child to be brought to a testing situation knowing he or she might not be able to enter school if he or she doesn't do well. That's very wrong.

What's the alternative?

Good teachers, psychologists, and other evaluators are developing testing situations that make it a lot of fun for children. The Chapel Hill schools spend the first three days of the school year in this kind of testing for kindergarten children. Except for the time they are being evaluated, the children don't even come to school for the first three days. Now some people question that technique, but I favor it more and more because it permits a very intensive look at a child's developmental level. The children have a great time. The kindergarten teachers who do the testing interact with the children in a very warm, supportive, encouraging way; it's like, "Here you're in school for the first time, and I'm one of the teachers. I might just be your teacher." It's never with the notion that, "Depending on how you score on that test, it will determine whether or not you come to kindergarten." Instead, it's, "We're going to play these games and have lots of fun."

Another issue you've said is a concern is full-day versus half-day kindergarten. Is that really a legitimate question?

Yes, although it's not simply a question of which produces higher achievement. We have plenty of research showing that children in full-day kindergarten have higher test scores, but we also have data showing no significant difference over time. There is more research favoring full-day, but we have evidence on both sides. So let's check that one off and move to other concerns. There are at least two.

The main reason I favor the full-day kindergarten is that in my observation all over the country, I note that children in full-day kindergartens are less hurried. There's no need to rush and have the language development group right this minute. There's no need to keep children from going to the block center because if they do we won't have time for our colors, our numbers, and letter recognition. In the full-day program it's perfectly fine for Sylvia to go to the block center; it's okay...
for children to go to the art center every day; it's wonderful if children want to go to the housekeeping center and involve themselves in dramatic play. So a full-day program allows time for the kinds of activities that are so important in the development of children of this age.

The second reason I believe that full-day is needed is a controversial one; it involves the need for quality care as well as quality education. I believe that many children today need a safe, secure, happy environment, and that the public schools should provide it.

Some educators don't like to hear that kind of talk because we feel we're professionals; we're responsible for education. The fact that society has a need is not necessarily our problem; that should be somebody else's problem.

I understand, but I don't feel that way at all. Caring for children's physical, social, and mental needs is all part of quality care and education. If we support a child development approach, then we understand that a child's social, emotional, and physical needs are just as important as cognitive needs. In fact, all are dependent on each other. Good quality care as well as quality education for our young children will offer the potential for long-term effects on positive social behaviors and intellectual achievement.

To help administrators know what kind of vision they might be working toward, will you describe how a developmental program operates?

Children in the programs that I've worked with spend about a third of their time on teacher-directed activities, small group or large group. Another third of the time they work on activities assigned to them by the teacher, and then work independently or in small groups with other children. The remaining third of the time they work on activities of their choice. Now, to organize a program like this, you've got to believe that children are naturally motivated to learn, and that they learn best when they're able to select and initiate some of their own activities. This internal motivator is encouraged by basing activities on children's own interests—by allowing children to make choices among activities that are clearly useful and meaningful to them. The curriculum in such a developmental program focuses on exploration, discovery, and experimentation with hands-on materials.

Don't a lot of educators feel that the idea popular in the '60s of having children make their own decisions may have been unwise, and that teacher-directed instruction is really more efficient?

Yes, there's definitely a move away from student decision making, and for a very good reason: many teachers tried this approach without incorporating the appropriate amount of structure that is required. I say that an experiential, child-centered learning environment must be very structured, meaning very organized. Teachers must know what they're doing, and children must know what they're supposed to be doing; when and where and how. Unless you have a management system that they clearly understand, children will not learn the basic skills, will not learn to move from one activity to another smoothly, will not learn to be responsible and independent.

Let's say a principal or superintendent believes that the kind of program you describe is desirable. How can he or she go about getting it? How open are most teachers to these ideas?

I find that most teachers are very open to doing whatever they think will be helpful for the children in their classrooms. Most teachers really do trust and respect children; they support a child-centered philosophy that stresses peer interaction, learning by doing, and positive self-concept development. The problem comes with the support they need, financial and moral. To have a developmental classroom, you must have a wide variety of concrete and sensory materials. The classroom needs to be organized with experiential learning centers that allow for differences in learning styles, that encourage children to explore a variety of materials and make decisions. In addition to learning centers, the curriculum in a developmental classroom is integrated and uses a unit approach to teaching and learning. It uses hands-on experiences and integrates math skills in areas such as cooking and science. It emphasizes language development. The program must be flexible enough to help each child learn according to individual needs, interests, and abilities.

A principal or administrator must believe that this kind of experiential learning is the way children grow, and must reward teachers through his or her comments, through his or her endorsement of materials they need and want, and through saying to the community, "We have a fine program here."

You make it sound as though all an administrator has to do is give adequate support and it will happen. Is that your experience?

Well, the support of an administrator is absolutely essential. We do have some strong teachers who are capable of moving ahead on their own, but there is a tremendous difference when that instructional leader is involved and supports the program.

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