

## Castles in the Sand: Response to Schweinhart and Weikart

Differences between open and academic preschool models are, in practice, modest. Emotional generalizations suggesting that open programs turn at-risk students away from juvenile delinquency are not persuasive.

Critiquing Schweinhart and Weikart's essay is a bit like responding to a Fourth of July speech extolling mom, baseball, and apple pie. Who can argue against their assertion that "high quality early education programs offer new hope to children at special risk of school failure"? Few can object to their pleas for better training and pay for preschool teachers and the institution of more "high quality" programs. The more hard-headed among us, though, might find the phrase "high quality" hopelessly vague.

Cleverly hidden among the platitudes, voluminous census data, and brief but emotional history of the preschool movement, however, a disturbing theme is introduced: that the direct teaching of academic material (such as numbers and basic language concepts) to disadvantaged preschoolers tends to socially damage these children and lead to juvenile delinquency. This theme was the focus of the authors' recent article in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* (Schweinhart et al. 1986) and consequently of several pieces in the popular press last spring. The authors argue in favor of the conventional "child development" approach to preschool wherein disadvantaged, educationally at-risk children are allowed to select their own activities and are never directly taught any academic material. They buttress their position primarily through emotional appeal and allusions to a small, rather flawed, exploratory study conducted by their own

High/Scope Foundation in a single community, the foundation's home base in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

The study purported to compare the later effects (at age 15) of three different preschool interventions—a nursery school, a direct academic approach, and the High/Scope approach. Earlier follow-up studies of students in these three groups had indicated no differences on academic, intellectual, and social measures at the end of kindergarten, second, or fourth grades. A mere 18 students per approach were included in this most recent follow-up of the students at age 15. Only 61 percent of the students in the academic program received two years of preschool (the remaining 39 percent received only one year), whereas all students in the High/Scope sample received two full years.

The bulk of the findings were not significant. No significant differences were found in self-esteem, locus of control, suspension, or court arrest records among the three models. Half of the adolescents had court records, regardless of program. Curiously, the authors included no measures of academic success as they had in previous research, relying instead on interviews with the teenagers, who were asked to discuss their problems at home, criminal activities, and use of marijuana. When we learn, for example, that they reported an average of 1.3 fights with their parents over their lifetime, we begin to doubt how accurately these teenagers (recalling that half of them have court records) re-

vealed all dimensions of their lives to the interviewer. (See Gersten 1986 for a full delineation of the study's questionable measures, design flaws, and curious decisions and interpretations.)

Based on a few significant differences on self-report measures of dubious validity, Schweinhart and Weikart conclude that academic preschool brings about juvenile delinquency more frequently than do other approaches. The authors fail to note that their conclusions are based not on actual but on *self-reported* juvenile delinquency. It is unarguably premature to make policy decisions based on the tentative data available.

Although the three models included in the study have philosophical differences, researchers who observed in the preschools noted many sources of overlap. Despite Schweinhart and Weikart's distinction between alleged active learning in High/Scope and alleged passive learning in the academic preschool, two studies (Seifert 1970, Weikart et al. 1978) revealed that students initiated as many interactions with teachers in one program as in the other. Similarly teachers made as many management or control statements in the open High/Scope program as in the presumably "pressure cooker" academic preschool (Hechinger 1986).

Many of the expert consultants brought in to observe did not find the models to be distinct. Sealey (cited in Weikart et al. 1978) *found no difference between the preschools on the pressure exerted on children to come*

up with single, right solutions (p. 51), and Glick (p. 56) noted considerable teacher-led direct instruction in the High/Scope approach. The use of phrases like "active" child-initiated learning vs. "passive" teacher-directed learning does not reflect the reality of the children's preschool experiences.

The information available is insufficient to declare which types of preschool experiences most enhance the lives of economically disadvantaged children. The congruency between actual classroom practices and philosophical foundations of early education models is in question. There is some research to suggest, however, that the type of vaguely articulated active learning model Schweinhart and Weikart advocate is particularly difficult to implement in public settings (Kennedy 1978).

Early childhood education needs to move away from vague, emotional phraseology (e.g., "high quality," "whole child") toward a realistic assessment of what actually happens in our preschool settings—much as elementary education did in the '70s. When Schweinhart and Weikart mention that a child at age three meets with teachers to "plan learning activi-

ties, and review accomplishments," is a child merely walking over to the sandbox, and is the teacher later telling her she did a nice job of building a castle?

The issue of determining which preschool approaches are most effective is a serious one. The field must

move away from the vague generalities Schweinhart and Weikart promulgate. □

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## Does Direct Instruction Cause Delinquency? Response to Schweinhart and Weikart

Policymakers would be mistaken to abandon direct instruction programs with proven effectiveness and scientific validity on the basis of Schweinhart's questionable data.

The conclusion that preschoolers taught by direct instruction end up with twice the rate of delinquency of children who come through the High/Scope program is alarming—

sufficiently alarming that it threatens in one stroke to undo the extensive and well-documented case for the educational benefits of direct instruction (e.g., Becker 1977, Bereiter and Kur-

land 1981, Pearson 1984, Roehler and Duffy 1981).

But is the conclusion valid? The study by Schweinhart and colleagues fails to provide adequate grounds for

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