



1. Early Childhood Education: A Perspective

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A STORY is told of the New England farmer who was approached by a traveler asking directions to a certain farmhouse. After pondering the traveler's question for a moment, the farmer is supposed to have said, "You know, son, if I wanted to get there, I wouldn't start from here."

We are not told what the problem was. Perhaps the traveler asked the wrong question, or perhaps he asked the question in the wrong way. Over the past ten years or so, a good many people have been asking what kind of preschool program will best prepare "disadvantaged" children for schooling and, ultimately, for life as adults. Recently the focus of this question has begun to shift from classroom to home and from school hours to extended day care. Before the focus shifts further, it seems appropriate to ask, by analogy, whether the farmer was not right in the response that he gave to the traveler.

Perhaps to ask how we can improve classroom or home teaching, or even parent education, to give the children of the poor a better break in the society is to ask the wrong question. Perhaps in order to find ways to improve the services that we educators offer to these children we may have to start someplace else in our search than along the familiar route through classroom and tutorial settings. It may well be that if we could reach a better understanding of the total educative environment in which children live, we would be better able to improve the parts for which we educators assume responsibility. There are many aspects of these larger settings which are not yet well enough understood.

In any case, curriculum workers and other educators need to be able to make better sense out of the many competing programs, promises, practices, and trends in early childhood education. We need to know whether there may be bases for choosing among alternatives before they are implemented, or whether we must wait until research comparing such alternatives is complete before we can tell. More specifically, we might ask the following kinds of questions:

- In what ways does the schooling which children receive in early childhood education programs really contribute to their overall development?
- To what extent are the forces which we educators control the ones that make significant differences in children's development in areas ranging from number concepts to self-concept?
- To what extent do either our descriptions or the actual day-to-day operations of various early childhood programs really differ in ways that significantly affect the course of children's learning and development?
- Where is the operational curriculum of early childhood programs actually located:
 - In written program descriptions and manuals?
 - In instructional materials and equipment?
 - In staff and student deployment arrangements?
 - In legislative policies and administrative structures?
 - In the minds of the adults with whom children come regularly into contact?

• Do we have trouble realizing as much help as we would like from various theories of learning and development because these theories are as yet incomplete and not fully enough tested, or because we have as yet made inadequate translations from theory to practice? (Or both?)

There is much desire throughout the land to find new and improved ways of education, and educators have as much of this desire as anyone. The hard questions about how to achieve this good still remain. It was with these questions in mind that the ASCD Early Childhood Education Council attempted to take up where the farmer in the opening story left off. The articles in the first section of this May issue are the results of that attempt.

To Describe, To Understand

When the Early Childhood Education Council convened in late summer 1969, one of the first tasks its members took on was the planning of a series of articles for publication by ASCD. After considering several possibilities, we decided that what would be of most use to ASCD members would be a set of materials designed to aid in describing and understanding the wide variety of current programs for young children.

Because most ASCD members are curriculum workers (either supervisors, principals, education professors, or teacher educators), involvement in the development of programs (and staffs) for young children is only part of a larger set of responsibilities. It is not possible at this point to say with any certainty just which kinds of programs are best for various kinds of children: neither is it possible within the limits of a few pages to describe adequately the main alternative kinds.

Our aim, therefore, is to provide curriculum workers with useful tools with which to examine current programs and proposals, to help them better understand what these programs contain, to be able more fully to assess potential program value for particular populations of children, and to gain insight into how such programs might best be imple-

mented and evaluated. We do not take a stand on what "the best" program should look like. We do, however, suggest ways to look at any program (actual or proposed) to assess its actual composition. We assume that anyone who knows the salient characteristics of a program should be in a good position to judge whether or not it fits the requirements of his local situation.

Part 4 of this set of articles contains a statement of "Guidelines for Analyzing Early Childhood Education Programs." Articles in Part 3 elaborate on four main sections of the Guidelines: Aims and Objectives, Program Procedures, Administrative Features, and Evaluation. These two parts are preceded and followed by articles intended to provide a larger framework in which to view the separate items in the Guidelines. Part 2 summarizes four main theoretical views of human development and learning, elements which are at least implicit in most programs. Part 5 arranges three of these views on a continuum and demonstrates how the interpretation of the data elicited by the Guidelines might be enriched through the identification of the views held by those who operate different programs. Much of the vocabulary used to describe educational programs has different meanings for different persons depending on their psychological views of man. These two articles, therefore, are designed to help alert the reader to these differences and to aid in the process of understanding them. The critical discussion of approaches to evaluation contained in Part 6 should contribute further to this process.

All of the articles in the early childhood section of this issue are the results of the joint efforts of the members of the Early Childhood Education Council, with the timely help of our colleague, Walter L. Hodges. We are grateful for the opportunity to present these papers to the readers of *Educational Leadership*.

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