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### The Efficacy of Hothousing in Early Childhood Education

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators and professionals have debated for some time how best to educate young children. The issue of "hothousing" or early educational acceleration sharply divides this professional community (Sigel, 1987). Recently hothousing has been translated into a strong movement towards starting young children in formal academic learning at an early age (Webster, 1984). Proponents of hothousing such as Siegfried and Therese Engleman (cited in Elkind, 1987) argued that children need a head start in life and should be given the opportunity to achieve the skills and knowledge necessary for them to compete in a modern world. The opponents counter that parents and educators beliefs about hothousing ignore relevant data and may educate children in a manner which increases "achievement anxiety" and makes children feel they have value only when they are producing (Sigel, 1987).

According to Weikert (1988), "Early childhood educators have divergent views about how to best meet the needs of children and achieve instructional goals from their theoretical perspectives" (p. 35). So the question that remains to be investigated is, what position should the early childhood profession take with regard to the phenomenon of hothousing young children?

## The Scope

This paper will examine both the historic perspectives and the sociological precursors to the hothousing phenomenon. Pertinent data on cognitive learning theory will be reviewed in an attempt to establish a sound theoretical rationale for a developmental approach to early education. Parental expectations for the education of young children will be reviewed. Early literacy in the teaching of reading in the kindergarten experience will be scrutinized as an example of hothousing in an academic setting. Stress will be investigated as an outcome of hothousing.

## Limitations

The scope of this paper will not permit the inclusion of such closely-related topics as the impact of high technology and computers on early education or the examination of the importance of play for young children. While many children are enrolled in and receive enriching experiences from child care, the merits of such care will not be addressed. Further, the value of parent involvement in a child's early education will be acknowledged and alluded to but will not be considered the major focus of this paper. Although hothousing does occur in the social and physical domains, this paper will be limited to hothousing in the intellectual (academic) domain.

## Definitions

**Hothousing.** The process of inducing infants and young children to acquire knowledge that is typically acquired at a later developmental level (Sigel, 1987).

**Development.** Change as a set of transformations, i.e., change in a state or quality (Sigel, 1987).

**Developmentally appropriate practice.** An educational guideline for developing quality programs for young children based upon age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. Applying knowledge of typical human development and the unique differences of the individual child to programming forms the basis for determining program quality (Bredekamp, 1986).

Individual is more frequently mentioned in education and psychology than Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. While Piaget's name is widely known, his theory of intelligence is extremely complex, fills numerous volumes, and is often confused by educators with early childhood curriculum (Morrison, 1984). The theories of Piaget have been used to form the theoretical basis for the position of developmental appropriateness in the education of young children.

Despite their complexity, evidence has accumulated to support Piaget's theories. Replication studies conducted in over half the countries of the world and on thousands of children continue to confirm the reliability of his cognitive learning theory (Ekind, 1987). (No attempt could be made in this paper to discuss the works of Piaget in detail. Rather, selected points from his works pertinent to the discussion will be addressed.)

The constructivist concept was central to an understanding of Piaget's theory. According to this concept, children literally constructed their knowledge of the world and their level of cognitive functioning through a process of self-directed activity. "Children continuously organize, structure,



## Chapter 2

### PIAGETIAN THEORY: THE BASIS FOR THE DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

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and restructure experiences they have in relation to existing schemes of thought" (Morrison, 1984, p. 104).

An additional influence on intellectual development according to Piaget, was maturation. Maturation was the development over time and was influenced by genetic characteristics as well as environmental characteristics such as nutrition. Maturation explained why the thinking of a child was not the same as the thinking of an adult (Morrison, 1984).

Piaget described four major stages in the development of a child's thinking. He argued that at each stage children did not simply copy an experience, but rather actively constructed reality out of each encounter with the environment. Those realities were for children a series of progressive approximations of adult reality and did not coincide point for point with the adult view of the world. According to Piaget, not until adolescence did children have the ability to think, reason, judge, and make decisions like an adult. Both the content and the form of a child's thinking changed with age (Elkind, 1988).

"The process of adaptation [was] for Piaget the essence of intellectual functioning" (Pulaski cited in Morrison, 1984, p. 106). It was comprised of the two interrelated processes of assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation was defined as the taking in of data through sensory impulses via experiences and impressions and incorporating them into knowledge previously created. Accommodation on the other hand was the process by which the intellect continually adapted its model of the world to fit each new acquisition. When balance was achieved between assimilation and accommodation, equilibrium resulted. Through this process of adaptation, the child developed units of knowledge referred to as schemes. When data



could be neither assimilated nor accommodated by the child, it was rejected. Children rejected data that was too radically different from past experiences. According to Piaget, there must have been some connection or relationship to past experiences for adaptation to occur (Morrison, 1984).

### Stages

Piaget identified four distinct stages of cognitive development in children. He contended that these stages were the same for all children, even the atypical child, and that all children went through these stages in the same order. What would vary, however, was the age at which individual children progressed through these stages. The ages he offered were only to be considered approximations. These progressive stages varied qualitatively as well as quantitatively from each other.

At the first stage, newborn infants started with only reflexive structures. Those reflexes permitted the child to act upon the world (by looking, sucking, and grasping, etc.) and to develop (by the process of adaptation) into cognitive structures. These cognitive structures formed the basis for both the knowledge of the physical world and the understanding of general principles (Rosenblith & Sims-Knight, 1985). This stage Piaget identified as the "sensorimotor" stage and ranged from birth to about two years. The optimal environment for the sensorimotor child would provide materials and opportunities to stimulate sensory responses through active exploration of the environment.

The next, or "preoperational" stage began at approximately two years and ended at around age seven. The preoperational child was less dependent upon sensorimotor action for the construction of knowledge, and was more able to internalize events using representational symbols such as

words. The preoperational child did not have the cognitive structure to be able to manipulate mentally and was dependent upon the manipulation of concrete objects to build schemes. The preoperational child made judgements, expressed ideas, and based perceptions mainly on the interpretation of how things were physically perceived by the senses (Morrison, 1984).

At about age seven, children moved to the "concrete operations" stage. Here the child became less involved with perceptions of how things looked and could begin to develop schemes through internal mental processes called operations. A characteristic of the concrete operational child was the ability to conserve or understand that change involving physical appearances did not necessarily change quality or quantity. The child at this stage would become less egocentric and begin to understand that other people had thoughts and feelings that were different from their own (Morrison, 1984).

In the fourth or "formal operations" stage which occurred at roughly the same time as adolescence, the child developed the ability to reason scientifically and logically and to think with all the processes and power of an adult. The thinking process of the formal operations child would range over time to include the past, present, and future. Although the way in which a person would think would be for the most part established by age 15, new schemes would continue to be developed through the processes of assimilation and accommodation.

### High Scope Curriculum

The longest and most extensive evaluation of early childhood education ever undertaken was the Perry Preschool Study conducted over a period of five years in the Ypsilanti, Michigan school system by Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, and Weikart (cited in Weikert, 1988). The High/Scope curriculum developed for the project was based on the cognitive-development theory of Jean Piaget. The basic question of the study was, "Can high quality early childhood education make a permanent impact on the lives of the participating children?"

The High/Scope curriculum was designed to allow each child to construct his/her learning experience within a classroom environment designed by the teaching staff. The curriculum required each child to make a plan to be recorded by the teacher. The child was responsible to carry out the plan and to evaluate it at its conclusion. The open-framework design of the curriculum was developed to allow for children's initiative, sense of responsibility, problem solving ability, social cooperation, and individual competence in a variety of psychomotor and intellectual skills. The program was not a pre-academic orientation program designed to provide early practice for the child in skills normally mastered in kindergarten or first grade (Weikart, 1988).

Data collected after 15 years indicated that the intellectual achievements of the children participating in the three distinct approaches to preschool did not differ. All curricula were successful at reducing school failure. The curriculum study's most recent data suggested, however, that there were important social consequences among the three preschool curriculum choices. Results of the study seemed to indicate that preschool

curriculum which emphasized direct transmission of knowledge was less successful in helping children adapt to the personal realities of rules and conventions (Weikert, 1988). "The latest interpretation from the study, such tenuous though the data are, now must be that a high quality preschool curriculum is based on child initiated learning activities" (Weikart, 1988, p. 38). According to Weikart, we must be aware of treating a child too firmly, of being too domineering, and of not respecting a child's inherent growth and patterns and rhythms. Being too directive results in problems. The concern, he says, over hothousing, superbaby, or other formal academic approaches has real base.

### The Historical Perspective and Sociological Precursors

Curiously, the social phenomenon called hothousing is not simply a concern for contemporary society. Fearful forecasts of "Worry, terror, and overwork for the very young" (Zuckerman, 1987, p. 256) have been with us for a long time. More than a century ago, American educators decried the over-pressure and over competitiveness of this country's schools.

G. Stanley Hall, the leading psychologist of his day, placed blame squarely on teachers with statements such as "There are many teachers so possessed by the demon of education and so professionally nearsighted that they claim the almost exclusive right to the child's time . . . allowing no chance for independent growth" (cited in Zuckerman, 1987, p. 256).

Parents, Hall postulated, allowed and encouraged teachers to over press their children, sowing seeds of suffering and incapability. Educators agreed on the source of this dismal diagnosis: American children were subject to an



unwholesome competitiveness that affected home and school alike (Zuckerman, 1987).

Similar criticisms were echoed by other intellectuals of that era such as Herbert Spencer and Mary Putnam Jacobi and have resurfaced periodically throughout modern educational history. American society remains anxiety ridden over the exact same issues. Are we pushing our children sufficiently or insufficiently? Are we too competitive or not competitive enough? We oscillate endlessly between the same ambivalences (Zuckerman, 1987).

According to Zuckerman (1987), the issue that both tantalizes and terrifies us is progress. Progress on the one hand seems to offer relief from pressure through it's technology, then alternately intensifies that pressure as we attempt to keep pace with that same technology. Every generation, says Zuckerman, has imagined itself to be the first to address such dilemmas and in so doing romanticizes and envies it's predecessors their exemption from such stress filled events.

Contemporary educators continue to warn against hothousing children. Elkind (1987), an outspoken scholar and advocate for children, contends that:

The concept of childhood so vital to traditional American way of life is threatened with extinction in the society we have created. Today's child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress--the stress borne of rapid bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations. (p. 3)

Like other educational trends, hothousing is impacted by social, political and economic factors. Social theorists have isolated factors contributing to the hothousing phenomenon in society. The launch of the Sputnik capsule by the USSR in 1957 initiated the "race for space" as well

as a massive criticism of the American educational system. The pressure generated by this alleged "race" in the 1960s started a movement that brought university academics into the business of writing educational curriculum. While the academicians surely knew their subjects, they were often ignorant about how much and how fast young children could learn (Elkind, 1987).

Bruner's much quoted position, "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development" (cited in Seefeldt, 1985, p. 13) became a sort of rallying cry for those favoring early academics. Bloom's statement that a young child would attain half of his/her intellectual ability by the age of four (based on well known correlations between IQ scores attained by the same subject at different ages) (cited in Elkind, 1986) generated a sense of urgency within the early education field.

Dovetailing with such statements by reputable scientists was post-WWII research done in infants in orphanages. The children in these studies were found to be developmentally delayed due to lack of human contact and stimulation. The findings generated a fear in parents that by not intentionally stimulating their young children, a precious chance to boost their children's intellectual power might be lost forever (Rubenstein, 1991).

### Demographic Factors

Researchers have identified demographic factors contributing to a generation of modern parents with less time to spend with their children and a higher anxiety in relation to themselves and their children (Gallagher & Coche, 1987). Census data indicating crucial changes in the demographics of parenting show that despite an overall drop in the birth rate between 1975



and 1980, there was a 94% growth in first births to women over 30. This relates closely to the advent of women into the workplace. Forty-five point five percent (45.5%) of mothers of children under three now work outside the home. Researchers indicate that most mothers who work outside the home did not take time away from household responsibilities as they returned to the workplace, but rather limited their leisure activities. These statistics point to a "stretched thin" situation for dual-career families. This says developmental psychologists, causes parents to react by overstructuring their children's learning environment in response to feelings of inadequacy and guilt (Gallagher & Coche, 1987).

### Parental Expectations

In a further attempt to explain the hothousing phenomenon, social theorists postulate that parents' personal ambitions have become so intertwined with their anxiety about the future that their achievements and those of their children have become inseparable (Hills, 1987b). T. Berry Brazelton, noted researcher and pediatrician stated that "Children have become a primary symbol of leisure class status. That status is reflected in their education, their dress, and what sports they play" (cited in Gallagher & Coche, 1987, p. 205). The danger of such a position appears to be the message imparted to these children that they are valued less as small people and more as achievement-oriented objects; as social indicators of their parents success (Gallagher & Coche, 1987).

Scientists such as Douvan (cited in Hills, 1987b) have observed an ambivalent attitude towards children in our society. On the one hand, children are seen by adults as valuable, with high potential for achievement and worthy of pride and investment, and on the other, children are

impatiently pressed to grow up and get through childhood as quickly as possible. Childhood is in effect disappearing. This greatly concerns educators who view children's abilities to cope in complex society as dependent upon relatively long periods of growth and development (Hills, 1987a).

This need by parents for children to increasingly become more competent at younger ages alarms scientists who point to Bowlby's research (1958) demonstrating the need for adequate and consistent care during the early years. According to Gallagher and Coche (1987):

We may expect a generation of 'superbabies' to mature with superficial social skills intact, with great achievement capacity, but with a sense of emptiness produced by inadequate time spent in an intimate parent-child relationship produced by a more relaxed, less structured parenting. (p. 205)

The manifestations of the hothousing phenomenon in the less affluent family where the parents do not have the luxury of giving themselves the choice of being home, becomes the latchkey experience for children. Extreme maturity demands are placed upon the children in the name of financial and/or psychological needs. These children are pressured to rapidly assume self-care responsibilities placing inappropriate demands upon them. For some families, children represent the only degree of flexibility in the family budget (Garbarino, 1984).

Additionally, the cost of child care is a major concern for families--the low income family in particular. Few families can afford to devote more than 10% of total income to child care. Yet in 1984, the average cost of out-of-home care ranged from \$50 to \$100 per week, with infant care on the high end of the range. The median family income for 1983 was \$24,580 (Dickerson & Ross, 1985). For families in this middle income group, that

equated to as much as \$5200 per year or nearly 21% of the annual income. The costs of out-of-home care have continued to spiral upward out of control until currently the low income family may be forced to pay up to one-half to its income for child care (J. Mayala, personal communication, October, 1991). The inability for low income families to absorb the cost of child care encourages the enrollment of children who may not be developmentally ready for formal learning into an academic public school placement (kindergarten) for reasons of economic necessity.

Educators such as Minuchin (1987) contended that the thrust toward hothousing, hurrying (Elkind's term), or "gourmet babies" is partially borne out of parents' fears and fantasies about their children's potential for success in a technologically dominated future. These parents feel an obligation to push their children early, sensing that the power and the opportunity belong to those with advanced knowledge and a competitive edge. According to Minuchin, this feeling is based on the false premise that the whole educational process will go faster if started early, packaged in small units, and children are rewarded for the right response. Minuchin further explained that these parents ignore or are ignorant of the function of biological maturity as a determinant of cognitive development.

What will young children need to know in the future? Can parents be assured that non-hothoused children will possess the skills needed to function successfully in an increasingly complex world? Yes say Minuchin (1987) and others, if we adopt a broader and more realistic model of child development that includes creative thinking skills and complex problem solving abilities that take us beyond the impulse to accelerate the measurable accomplishments of babies.

### Early Literacy and Kindergarten

"No authority in the field of child psychology, pediatrics, or child psychology advocates the formal instruction, in any domain, of infants and young children" Elkind (1989, p. 8) stated with great emotion. And yet it is possible to engage six-month-old infants in abstract thinking ability says Dr. Susan Ludington-Hoe. Glenn Doman, founder of the Better Baby Institute asserts that by using his techniques, parents can turn their infant children into prodigies. Sidney Ledson offers parents a program for teaching very young children phonics and basic reading skills (Elkind, 1987). And in kindergartens across the United States, the traditional concept of the "children's garden" has become a pressure cooker where two workbooks in a 2.4 hour session, with a maximum of 10 minutes of play, are not uncommon (Seefeldt, 1985).

What is the cause of such radically oppositional views among early education professionals? Noted scholar Katz (1987b) contends that much of the issue can be attributed to insufficient research on the topic of young children in the public school system. Research into early education is often unethical to perform and impractical because of the rapid development of children during this period making it difficult to discriminate among changes caused by intervention versus changes caused by maturation. The vacuum created by the lack of verifiable data has been filled by erroneous ideologies that are often resistant to change.

A strong body of research does exist on intellectual and social development and learning which is rich with implications for the kind of teaching and curriculum that should be provided children (Katz, 1987a). The research into what constitutes a meaningful literacy experience places



much emphasis on the method of instruction used. To acquire literacy, "Children must discover the forms and functions of language. Discovery is the key, not rote memorization or laborious concern over the forms of language" (Barbour, 1989, p. 304). Foundational to the emphasis on method is the research of psycholinguists such as Chomsky (cited in Willert & Kamii, 1985) which indicated that children learned language in both its written and spoken form by making rules and relationships from within rather than from absorbing them from the environment (Willert & Kamii, 1985).

Many kindergartens and preschools are now teaching phonics to prepare children for the first grade. Here, too, much of the objection focuses upon the methods used; with worksheets and drill being the most common. Educators' concerns arise over the fact that when such didactic lessons are given to young children, all the initiative comes from the teacher. When this happens, teachers unintentionally prevent children from developing their natural initiative. Further, children who are not developmentally advanced enough to learn phonics, learn to submit to adult power and often lose confidence in their own ability to read (Willert & Kamii, 1985).

The professional literature is permeated with such statements as "Kindergarten children who must sit and fill out worksheets, memorize facts, and recite the alphabet are not really learning; they are not thinking or solving problems" (Seefeldt, 1985, p. 13). The concern again is not for the cognitive learning goals per se, but for the educators narrow, linear conceptions of what learning should be. Alternative instructional approaches would allow children to learn reading skills and the purpose of reading in the context of language development (Sheppard & Smith, 1988).

Scheckendanz, Chay, Gopin, Sheng, Song, & Wild (1990) described the characteristics of what were referred to as "meaningful literacy episodes" (p. 5). These events were meaningful because they occurred within the context of a child's ordinary life events as opposed to the more contrived literacy events that typically occurred at school. Meaningful events were not separated from the broader language contexts. Rarely was there any focus on information for information's sake or practice out of context. These meaningful events were child-initiated, and child-directed, with a partnership quality to the adult-child interaction. Adults used the technique of "scaffolding" to include the child even when the child couldn't contribute much.

Methods that assist children in their advent towards literacy are those which enable children to be active participants in the experience and construct their own knowledge. Experiences in the kitchen, backyard, and home may be the sources for helping children develop many substructures of pre-reading skills that will enable them to easily enter into reading (Range, 1980).

One of the strongest criticisms against the didactic teaching methods used in some preschools and kindergarten takes issue with what Katz (1987a) refers to as a child's "disposition" towards learning. Katz' criticism of these methods is that the early introduction of academic or basic skills may undermine the development of the child's proclivity to use the skills thus acquired. Katz stated "Clearly it is not very useful to have skills if in the process of acquiring them the disposition to use them is lost" (p. 4). The issue for educators is not what methods produce higher test scores in the early grades, but rather what kind of teaching enhances children's desire to



read, to write well, to acquire more knowledge, to think critically about what they read, and to communicate effectively with people (Willert & Kamii, 1985). In such a fragile environment as kindergarten, early academic pressure can destroy the purpose, value and benefits for children (Seefeldt, 1985).

Educators have become so concerned over the "shoved-down" curriculum adopted by schools that a number of national research and advocacy groups have published position statements regarding curriculum development. Among these is the policy of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1990) which states:

Curriculum should be planned for the developmental levels of children and emphasize individual planning to address a wide range of developmental levels in a single classroom. It is the responsibility of the educational system to adjust to the developmental needs and levels of the children it serves: children should not be expected to adapt to an inappropriate system. (p. 23 )

Kutner (1991), a University of Minnesota child psychologist and nationally syndicated columnist, contends that the most critical lesson of early education is not directly related to the amount of content a child can recall on cue. Instead, it is the realization that they can be effective and successful learners. Early education should help children feel good about themselves.

Bettelheim (cited in Fields, 1987) summarized the educational needs of children this way:

Since the future is always uncertain, we cannot know what particular problems our children will encounter in life; therefore the best we can give them on their way into life is our trust in them and a sense of their own worth. (p. 120)

### Stress--An Outcome of Hothousing

Few people grow through childhood into adulthood without experiencing some degree of stress in their lives. Stressors vary between those that are major and minor and those that are acute and chronic. Some have little or no long-term effect. Others change lives forever. According to Wolfenstein (cited in Hamlin, 1985), there is stress from just being a child in an adult world.

Seyle (cited in Honig, 1986), an early leader in stress research, defines stress as "A stimulus event of sufficient severity as to produce disequilibrium in the homeostatic psychological systems" (p. 50). Stress has both emotional and biological components. The body cannot, however, distinguish between positive and negative stress (Rotter, 1985). Stress can cause such changes in bodily functions as illness, fatigue, pain, changes in the galvanic skin response, and an increased heart rate.

Not all stress is harmful. Stress can serve as a positive motivator. According to Shrier (1984) "Even stress that may have been initially overwhelming has the potential for beneficial effects, as well as the potential for damage and disorder" (p. 10). Stress can propel a child forward to maturation. The young child learning to walk is an example of how stress can become a challenge for learning. Despite tumbles and bumps, the child continues to pick itself up until balance and coordination are developed and walking is achieved.

Psychological research confirms that parental expectations upon children are a source of great stress on family members. Parents see their children through the eyes of expectancy and are frequently tempted to push children too fast to meet their own expectations for them. When this occurs, both the adult and the child experience stress. Stanford Researcher Carl Thoreson believes that 25-30% of children are really "under the gun." According to his findings, highly stressed children show a great deal more of the chronic stress symptoms of stress: headaches, sore throats, stomach problems, trouble sleeping, muscle tension in the neck and head, dry mouth, and sweaty palms (cited in Leman, 1987). The American Association of Pediatrics has expressed concern over the dramatic increase in stress related symptoms seen in young children (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986).

Early education has become a contributor to the stress of many young children. According to Uphoff and Gilmore (1986) "Many well meaning but ill-informed parents and educators are pushing young children into our school systems too soon" (p. 11). Being bright and being ready are two separate issues. Being pushed beyond developmental limits increases the chances for failure dramatically.

Elkind (1987) concurred describing the push for early academics as "epidemic." Specialists in child development may worry that young children are being pushed to do more than they are developmentally ready to do. The result is stress on children that may effect how they perceive themselves as learners and as competent individuals (Hatch, 1988). "To ignore the stress that early academic programs can place on children . . . is to risk education that does damage in the years when the foundations are being laid" (Hatch, 1988, p. 147). The New York Department of Education states:

Demanding kindergartens create too much stress for youngsters and can have damaging effects.

The concept of the "shoved-down" curriculum is cited in the research as stress-producing agent for young children. Responding to societal pressures, kindergartens have metamorphasized into "first grades a year earlier." They have become pressure cookers where children are expected to master what traditionally has been first grade content (Webster, 1984). Teachers trained in the developmental approach to early education recognize that skill-based pencil and paper programs fly in the face of what the research calls "developmentally appropriate practice" and yet feel pressured by administrative and parental expectations to teach academically oriented curricula (Hatch, 1988).

Skill-based programs are too stressful for many young children because their design and content are out of sync with the nature of about to be five and five-year-olds. Back to basics curricula have been found by researchers at the University of Rochester to turn children off even though their achievement scores were higher (Balaban, 1987).

What role can early education professionals have in mediating the stress schools place on children? Professional organizations such as the Southern Association for Children Under Six and the National Association for the Education of Young Children are calling for developmentally appropriate teaching materials and evaluative procedures that reflect the goals and objectives of the instructional program rather than pressure for higher achievement scores. Further they recommended programs which encourage language development and an interest in reading through language experience which integrates listening, speaking, writing, and



reading. Children, they asserted, need to be offered direct experiences that offer opportunities to communicate feelings and thoughts. The development of such intellectual functions as curiosity, critical thinking, and creative expression should be encouraged as an alternative to skill-based programming (Castle, 1985).

### Teacher Development

"Foundational to the success or failure of early childhood programs is the quality of the teachers who operate this systems" stated Davis & Swick (1985, p. 56) of Virginia Commonwealth University. Of concern to educators is the practice by many schools and care centers of staffing with underqualified teachers, i.e., individuals without educational training in child development, family dynamics, and parental education and interactions (Davis & Swick, 1985). "Professionals in early childhood education have a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that characterize their performance in contrast to the untrained practitioner" (Katz, 1986a, p. 33).

The inherent danger in utilizing the underqualified early educator is that "quality education" is misconstrued by such individuals to mean watered down academics and pressure laden teaching strategies (Puckett, 1985). Research has consistently documented that highly skilled teachers exhibit effective verbal and non-verbal communication with children and parents; are skilled in planning learning environments that meet children's needs; and are able to utilize a diversity of teaching strategies and resources (Goodland cited in Davis & Swick, 1985).

This understanding by qualified teachers of the development and needs of young children carries a practical, positive outcome in the educational setting. In studies conducted on stress factors in children,

powerful role models offering emotional support were found to be very effective in helping children become "resilient" to stress. One of the most frequently encountered role models was a favorite teacher. These teachers were found to restore a child's emotional balance by either decreasing a child's exposure to stress or by increasing the number of protective factors (Werner, 1984).

"The informed early childhood educator is in a most unique and powerful position for helping parents make wise choices for the growth and development of their children" (Puckett, 1985, p. 52). It is time, say educators, for hiring practices and teacher certification to reflect what we know about child development rather than what is convenient for school systems and administrations (Castle, 1985). It is within a supportive, non-pressured environment, says Elkind (1987) that young children acquire a solid sense of security, positive self-esteem, and a long-term enthusiasm for learning.

### Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The NAEYC position. Incorporating both the theories of Piaget and research findings such as those of the Perry Preschool Study, the NAEYC has developed a policy for what it considers to be developmentally appropriate practice in a quality early childhood program (cited in Bredekamp, 1987). The NAEYC defines a developmentally appropriate early childhood program as providing a safe and nurturing environment incorporating physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children while responding to the needs of families. This comprehensive statement emphasizes child initiated learning and active



hands-on experiences with a variety of materials and interactions with peers and adults.

The NAEYC contends that the trend toward early academics is antithetical to what is known about how young children learn. Although program quality is affected by many factors, a major determinant is the extent to which knowledge of child development is applied to program structures--the degree to which a program is developmentally appropriate. "Programs should be tailored to meet the needs of children, rather than expecting children to adjust to the demands of a particular program" (cited in Bredekamp, 1987, p. 1).

Development is a truly fascinating and wonderful phenomenon. It is not something to be accelerated or skipped. One period of childhood or aspect of development is not better or more important than another; each has its own tasks to accomplish. (cited in Bredekamp, 1987, p. iv)

Finding the optimum level of stimulation, motivational challenge, and balance of experiences to promote growth for each child is certainly the central task faced by early childhood professionals (Brown, 1985, p. 27).

However, the bad news is that some parents and educators avoid to give young children the best possible start in life through learning and development with the academically oriented, subject-oriented learning and teaching techniques of their own past formal education. Not cognizant of the value of the developmental approach to early education, these individuals involve children in the pressure-cooker and playfully harmful manipulations of the superiority or hothousing syndrome. It is clear to this writer that there exists a misconception of what constitutes appropriate education for the very young.

### Chapter 3

#### POSITION

"In the last 15 years, the enrollment of three- and four-year-olds in preschool programs has approximately doubled, from 20% to 40% of eligible children, and the percentage of five-year-olds has climbed from 70% to about 95%" (Sava, 1987, p. 15).

This appears to be a positive indicator that parents have acted on what child development experts have been saying since the 1960s: that young children have an appetite to learn and that learning can be stimulated by carefully designed preschool programs that provide a rich environment to explore under the guidance of a specialist trained to respond to a child's cues of interest.

However, the bad news is that some parents and educators anxious to give young children the best possible start in life have equated learning and development with the academically oriented, subject-centered learning, and teaching techniques of their own past formal educations. Not cognizant of the value of the developmental approach to early education, these individuals involve children in the pressure-laden and potentially harmful manifestations of the superbaby or hothousing syndrome. It is clear to this writer that there exists a misconception of what constitutes appropriate education for the very young.

### What Position Should the Informed Early Childhood Educator Adopt in This Debate?

Hothousing practices are viewed by the early childhood profession as counter-productive and potentially damaging to children. This writer agrees that research has been misinterpreted to mean that high standards for early education programs involve watered-down academics and pressure-laden teaching strategies (Puckett, 1985).

Part of the confusion for parents and educators has been caused by a too narrow definition of what constitutes appropriate learning for young children. Curriculum has been developed around what is easily measurable on standardized tests. And what is easily measurable is the skill-based memorization of facts such as alphabet letters. This, say educators, is not real learning. "When education forces and affirms memorization, children grow up without knowing how to ask questions. Children need to learn to think and search for answers" (Fields, 1987, p. 111).

Research is clear that the definition of learning is far broader than skills and drills. It has proven conclusively that young children do not learn in the same way as do older children or adults. The skills based didactic methods used by the hothousing approaches ignore this crucial point. This writer agrees with scholars such as Kamii who emphasized that the mindless memorization of information is not learning for children. Rather, knowledge is obtained by young children through the manipulation of objects in situations that are personally meaningful, and which allow opportunities for the child to make decisions (Balaban, 1987). Children developing their own knowledge by constructing one level after another of being "wrong" (Kamii, 1985). Additionally, the developmental approach

takes into account Piagetian theory regarding the importance of the biological maturation of the individual child.

The response to these who would hothouse young children is the developmental approach, based upon years of clinical research and observations of children. The concern of this approach is with age and individual appropriateness of the learning experience for each child.

It must be clearly stated that the developmental approach does not posit that no activity related to future scholastic achievement should be undertaken by young children. Rather this approach emphasizes the "Importance of meeting individual needs while providing a rich, stimulating and satisfying cognitive and psychosocial context through which children can grow" (Puckett, 1985, p. 49).

The choice then for early childhood educators is not simply between an academic approach or a socialization focus. While introducing academic tasks to young children can be fraught with stress and risk, the alternative to this approach does not seem to be endless spontaneous play--although play is important. What does seem to be indicated in early education is an intellectually oriented approach where children interact in small groups in which they have ample opportunity to initiate activities that interest them. The intention should be to "engage young children's minds in improving their understanding of relevant phenomena in their environment" (Katz, 1987b, p. 18).

Teachers have not been the only group to have drawn incorrect inferences from early childhood development. Parents, policy makers, principals, administrators, colleagues, and the news media among others, have misinterpreted the mission of early childhood education to mean

earlier is better. The informed early childhood educator, because of his/her position, is uniquely able to promote wise choices for the growth and development of children--choices that dispel the unnecessary pressures imposed by the ill-informed. It is the responsibility of the early childhood professional to promote education that meets all the child's developmental needs--physical, emotional, and intellectual.

It is the position of this writer that the early childhood educator must be very involved in the children's learning--assuming the role of facilitator. The educator bears the responsibility to stimulate the intellectual development of children employing very different teaching strategies from the didactic practices appropriate for use with older children. The early educator is to be neither a passive observer, nor a drill-oriented task master. The early educator must demonstrate the ability to encourage intellectual skills through the development of a creative environment conducive to active exploration of concrete objects and opportunities for children to problem solve.

To believe the narrowly defined message that appropriate education for the very young should consist of measurable intellectual achievements--wastes the promise of early education. Parents and teachers must be brought to realize that building upon a child's intrinsic interest is the key to appropriate early childhood educational practices. We must give up the tendency to substitute adult conceptions of learning for those preschoolers initiate on their own (Sava, 1987).



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