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ABSTRACT

This paper describes issues in early childhood education that were most pressing 5, 10, 15, and 20 years ago, indicates whether these have been resolved, and outlines issues now considered urgent. In 1967, the most salient issues were the following: How important is early childhood for education? When should early education begin? Can early education compensate for childhood experiences at home? Are the effects of early education permanent? In 1972, the central issue was what kind of early educational program is best? By 1977, the most pressing issues had shifted to the following: How can early education be done most efficiently and cheaply? Is parent education the answer? How does parent education work? In 1982, a new issue had arisen: What are the effects of full-time day care on preschool children's development? Today, the most pressing new issues seem to be: How can we maximize the fit between programs and participants? What are the implications of the superbaby trend? What are the effects of day care on infants' development? A plea is made for research studies to be conducted that will address these urgent issues. (Author/RH)

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EVOLVING ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Evolving Issues in Early Childhood Education

Abstract

The urgent issues in early childhood education have changed substantially over the past two decades since early education was first identified as a means of social change in this country. In this paper I describe the issues that were most pressing 5, 10, 15 and 20 years ago, indicate if and how each of these issues has been settled, and outline the urgent new issues for today. In 1967, the most salient issues were the following: How important is early childhood for education? When should early education begin? Can early education compensate for childhood experiences at home? Are the effects of early education permanent? In 1972, the central issue was what kind of early educational program is best? By 1977, the most pressing issues had shifted to the following: How can early education be done most efficiently and cheaply? Is parent education the answer? How does parent education work? In 1982, a new issue had arisen: What are the effects of full-time day care on preschool children's development? Today, the most pressing new issues seem to be: How can we maximize the fit between programs and participants? What are the implications of the superbaby trend? What are the effects of day care on infants' development? A plea is made for doing research that will address these urgent issues.

EVOLVING ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The history of early childhood education begins for me, and to some extent for this country, just 20 years ago. It was the height of the 1960s. We were young, fresh, eager. Everyone was fighting against the war in Vietnam and in the War on Poverty. Developmental psychologists who had spent their entire professional lives in pristine laboratories were venturing into the messy real world. A promising new program, Project Head Start, had just been started and was going to change the world. Social relevance was our number one priority. We were irrepressibly optimistic, hopelessly hopeful. We weren't just fighting in the War on Poverty, we were going to win the war--soon. And the way we were going to win the war, for some of us, at least, was through early childhood education. Early childhood education was an exciting new idea --an idea which raised important issues and questions for developmental psychologists and educators.

Two decades later, early education is still an exciting idea and still raises important issues. But those issues have changed. Today, it is worth considering how the issues in early childhood education have evolved over the years and what the most pressing issues are now. In this paper, I give my view of what the important issues over the past 20 years have been, how those issues have been settled or dropped, and what new issues have evolved or arisen.

Issues circa 1967

In 1967, the key issue in early childhood education was just how important the earliest years of life are for education. Until that time, formal education generally had been limited to instruction during the school years. Even nursery school traditionally had been intended to enrich

children's social development not to provide them with academic instruction. In the 1960s people suggested that valuable time was being lost by putting off education until the school years. Some people went even further. They suggested that early childhood not only was important for education but was, in fact, a critical period for education. Just as embryos do not develop normally physically if their needs for nutrition are not met during the critical period of organ formation, they suggested, so children would not develop normally intellectually if their needs for education were not met during the critical period of intelligence formation. Just as embryos are permanently affected by agents that cross the placenta in the prenatal period, so children could be permanently affected by their educational experiences in the preschool period. Some people even questioned whether age 4 (or 3 or 2) years was early enough to begin early education. There was growing concern that Head Start, a program for 4-year-olds, was not having the clear, powerful, immediate effects that had been expected. As a result, some people suggested that what was needed was to begin even earlier, with infants. Either because infancy was the critical period for early education or because the effects of education were cumulative, they asserted, the earlier education started the better.

In addition to this issue of the timing of early education efforts, the other central issue in 1967 was the issue of whether early education is compensatory. People surmised that educational programs for young poor children could compensate for their depriving conditions at home and give them the kinds of experience that more privileged middle-class children enjoy. Whether this was indeed the case was a salient issue for psychologists and educators.

Issues circa 1972

To address these two issues, investigators undertook scores of programs for disadvantaged infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. By 1972, though, new issues had arisen. One in particular was the issue of what kind of educational program was "best." Each investigator had followed a somewhat different approach--open education or Distar, Montessori or Bank Street, Piagetian or behavior modification, parent-focused or child-oriented, center based or home visiting. There were even beginning to be a few efforts to compare different approaches to early education (like the Head Start Planned Variation study).

I was involved in one of these comparative efforts (Kessen, Fein, Clarke-Stewart, & Starr, 1975). In that study, we randomly assigned subjects to one of six conditions: There were three curriculum conditions. In the language oriented curriculum, home visitors encouraged mothers to talk to their children, describe ongoing activities, play language games, label toys, respond to and elaborate on the infants' vocalizations, and engage the children in dialogues. The goal of this curriculum was to promote children's development of language comprehension and production. In the play-oriented curriculum, home visitors helped mothers arrange environments where children could discover and explore interesting and diverse objects at their own developmental level and encouraged them to elaborate on the children's play with objects and to expand the activities the children began. The goal of this curriculum was to enhance children's symbolic and relational play with objects. In the social curriculum, home visitors provided mothers and infants with frequent opportunities for playful, reciprocal interaction, with and without the home visitor. The goal of this curriculum was to enrich children's interpersonal connections through mutual looking, playing, talking,

responding, and expressing affection. In these three conditions, the focus of the program and of the home visitor was on both mother and child--on the mother-child dyad. In two other conditions the home visitor focused her efforts on either the mother only (she talked to the mother and did not play with the child) or the child only (she was friendly to the mother but spent her time interacting directly with the child; the mother was not encouraged to watch or participate). There was also a test-only control group, assessed at the same intervals as the other groups but not visited in between.

By the time we had finished this study, we had discovered not which educational curriculum was best, but that early education was not as easy as we had expected or the panacea we had hoped for. It wasn't just that doing the research was difficult--difficult to design curricula and assessments at a time when there were no guidelines available, difficult to train home visitors to a uniform level of performance, difficult to manage the complexity of the program, the staff, the extensive assessments. More than that, it was that the results were difficult. They were difficult to analyze because of the many conditions, assessment points, and layers of multivariate measures we had included. But most of all, they were difficult to interpret. We had expected simple results: the language-oriented curriculum would enhance children's language development; the play-oriented curriculum would accelerate their cognitive development; the social curriculum would enrich their social development; the dyadic focus would be superior to the mother-only or child-only focus. What we got was p level soup. Effects on boys were different from effects on girls; effects on children in extended families were different from effects on children in nuclear families; the language curriculum was superior on some measures of intellectual development but not all; there was no simple match between curriculum and outcome; there was no clear advantage

of dyadic over monadic curricula; and effects evident after 6 to 12 months of home visiting did not persist until the end of the entire 18-month program. Nor were we helped by the fact that half way through the study our funding, and consequently our sample size, was substantially reduced.

Issues circa 1977

That reduction reflected the changing times, though. By 1977, no one was as naive or as hopeful or as generous about early childhood education anymore. People were looking for cheaper ways to produce social change. One suggestion they had come up with was parent education. Suddenly, parent training programs boomed. There were toy libraries for parents, brief interventions in clinic waiting rooms, home visiting program, and the most comprehensive program, the Parent-Child Development Centers. According to U.S. Commissioner of Education, Terrell H. Bell, (1976), parent education "was the key to effective education," and "every child had "the right to a trained parent." These parent training programs raised new issues for developmental psychologists and educators.

One issue was whether there was a justification for parent education in the findings of basic child development research. Basic research supposedly showed that parents were responsible for and substantially determined their children's development. In fact, this empirical base was shaky. The basic research consisted of studies that were either documentations of the effects on children's development of extreme environmental deprivation, like the conditions found in inadequate residential institutions, or correlational studies demonstrating associations between parents' behavior and children's development in white middle-class families. The first kind of study had limited applicability to children's development in normal families; the second kind of study had limited applicability to the poor, black mothers who were

the recipients of most parent education efforts. Neither kind of research demonstrated that parents actually caused their children's development.

Another issue was the presumed effectiveness of parent education. True, most parent-training programs that had been evaluated had been shown to have positive effects on children's intellectual development over the short run. But most parent programs had not been evaluated. Those that had been evaluated were model programs and it was unclear how widely their results could be generalized. Moreover, the evaluations of the model programs had been of the simplest sort: pre and post tests of children's IQ, with no randomly assigned control group for comparison. [When a control group had been used in the evaluation of one apparently successful parent-training program, moreover, the results had not been as positive as when the children in the program had merely been compared with a matched group of children (Madden, Levenstein, and Levenstein, 1976).] The observed effects of parent-training programs were always modest in size and usually short-lived. Effects on aspects of development other than intelligence had not been assessed. The effectiveness of parent education was an open issue.

There was also the issue of how parent education worked. The underlying assumption of parent educators was that the process consisted of a simple chain of influence from program designer to parent to child. This presumed process, however, was based on a chain of unexamined assumptions. There was, first, the assumption that what the program designers intended in designing their programs was what actually happened in the field. For the most part, home visitors had not been observed in situ. Near the end of our home visiting study (Kessen et al., 1975), we had the opportunity to videotape our home visitors at work. We were amazed to find out how our curriculum guidelines were often distorted by even our most willing and well-intentioned

home visitors. Then, there was the assumption that the message the home visitors intended was what got through to mothers. In our study, we discovered that the messages mothers were picking up from the home visitors were often oversimplification of what the home visitors intended. For example, mothers apparently heard the message "Play with your baby" but not the more subtle suggestions about how to play with the baby. Out of anxiety or ignorance, mothers distorted the message into something more familiar. Next, there were the assumptions that all mothers were equally ready for parent education and that mothers' goals for their children were the same as program designers.' Parents' receptivity and goals prior to parent education programs had seldom been assessed, but surely made a difference in the effectiveness and justifiability of parent education. There was also the assumption that increasing mothers' knowledge about child development and child rearing changed their behavior. Although a correlations between maternal knowledge and behavior had been found in some studies, this did not mean that knowledge caused behavior or that more knowledge would cause changes in behavior.

Another assumption of parent education was that mothers changed in the desired direction. In our study, mothers' behavior did not always change in the desired direction; mothers tended to become more directive, not less, for example, and their sensitivity to their children's behavior was unaffected by our program. The effect of parent education may be to strengthen rather than to diminish parents' natural styles, and the most important aspects of parents' behavior may be the most difficult to change. The next assumption of parent education was that changes in mothers' behavior caused changes in children's performance. In only a handful of studies had researchers assessed changes in mothers' behavior and children's development over the duration of

their programs. These researchers (Andrews et al., 1975; Forrester et al. 1977, Kessen et al., 1975, Kogan and Gordon, 1975) had found that changes in mothers' behavior neither consistently preceded nor were consistently correlated with changes in children's behavior. Finally, it was assumed that the effects of parent education would continue after the program ended because mothers would continue to stimulate their children according to the principles they had learned in the parent-training programs. This was why it was believed that parent education was the most cost effective approach to early education: parents would create pervasive and permanently stimulating environments for all their children. In fact, there was no evidence that parents continued their efforts after parent education programs ended or that they adapted what they had learned to their other children.

Issues circa 1982

By 1982, the burning issues in early childhood education had changed yet again. Some issues had been settled, some abandoned. Other new issues had arisen. The issue of the timing of early childhood education was no longer actively debated. By then it was widely accepted that infancy and early childhood are important periods for education, and strident arguments about "early versus late" had attenuated. It was also accepted that early childhood is not a critical period for development in the same way that the prenatal period is, that gains made early are not permanent and irreversible, and that early education does not inoculate children against later conditions. Although there seemed to be some lingering psychological and practical benefits, it was known that the effects of early childhood programs on children's I.Q. scores and school achievement tend to wash out without continued support (e.g., Lazar et al., 1982). The question of whether age 4 (or 3 or 2) years is "early enough" had not been answered in a general way,

but was being replaced by the more specific question: Early enough for what? For maximizing a person's potential to the fullest possible extent, it was agreed, age 4 (or 3 or 2) may not be early enough; for preparing children to do well in school, it probably is. No difference in children's gains had been found to be related to the age children start in early childhood programs (Casto & White, 1985; Clarke-Stewart, 1979). The issue of whether early education can compensate for inadequate conditions in children's home environments had also to some extent been settled. Although early education may compensate for some degree of parental ignorance and lack of material resources, it was clear that such programs did not eliminate the effects of poverty, discrimination, and inadequate schools.

The issue of what approach to early education is best--how long, how intense, how comprehensive, how focused, how structured, with what curricular emphasis--had not been settled. No single best approach had been demonstrated. But the debate on this issue also had died down. It seemed clear that, to some extent, in early education, as in life, you get out of it what you put into it. Longer, more intense, more comprehensive, and more structured programs had been found to have a better chance of leading to more substantial and longer lasting gains (cf. Bryant & Ramey, 1985; Casto & White, 1985; Clarke-Stewart & Fein, 1983)--at least up to a point, at which length becomes superfluous and structure becomes restrictive. By 1982, though, people were more likely to ask "Best for what?" and they were more likely to be concerned about what is best for the buck. Unfortunately, we did not know any more then than we did a decade earlier about which components of early childhood programs--teacher training, director involvement, written materials, etc., are critical to programs' success, because any investigator with a limited budget was likely to put all his or her best bets about what would

work into the program rather than systematically varying or holding back components. This issue is likely to remain with us for some time.

The issue of whether basic research in child development provides a firm basis for parent education programs is also still with us. What has become increasingly clear, though, is that children are not the malleable lumps we once thought they were, to be molded and shaped by their parents or anyone else. Now, developmental psychologists are more sensitive to biological and genetic constraints on development, constraints that make it unlikely that early education programs will have profound, permanent, and dramatic effects. This does not mean that educational efforts are useless, but it does lead us to temper our ambitions and calls for new efforts to mesh our programs with the innate capacities of the organism.

The issue of the process of change involved in parent education programs also is still around. But the answer has become clearer--in part because of what we have learned about child development from basic research. Because we now give more weight to the contribution of the infant to his or her own development, we are less likely to believe that everything that happens to babies is mediated by their parents or that parent education is the only or necessarily the most effective approach to infant education. Research on early education programs themselves has supported this view, showing that parent-focused programs are not more effective than child-focused programs (Casto & White, 1985; Clarke-Stewart, 1979).

In addition to these lingering issues, by 1982, a new issue in early childhood education had arisen. This was the issue of the effects--possibly damaging--of full-day early childhood programs. The number of mothers with preschool children who were employed outside the home had skyrocketed over the previous decade, and concern about the well-being of the children of these

working mothers was being expressed. Some speakers took a positive view and suggested that full-time day care was as benign as Head Start or nursery school. Others, extrapolating--inappropriately--from studies of the dire consequences of rearing children in residential institutions, vehemently opposed full-time day care. The issue required investigation of the actual effects of day care on children's development.

As soon as researchers began to study the effects of day care, however, it became clear that day care is not a uniform entity. Researchers then began to look for effects of different kinds and qualities of day care. This issue of differential day-care effects was difficult to resolve because most researchers had to rely on self-selected samples rather than randomly assigning children to day care of varying types or levels of quality. Nevertheless, despite some remaining controversy, progress was made. Research generally showed that day care did not harm and even apparently speeded up the development of social and intellectual competence in preschool children who attended high-quality educational, center based programs (Clarke-Stewart & Fein 1983).

Issues circa 1987

Today, in 1987, many of the issues in early childhood education that occupied us in the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s have been laid to rest. Even those that have not been settled do not seem as pressing as they once did. Now developmental psychologists and educators are confronted by a new set of issues and concerns. In my view, there are several that are most urgent.

To begin with, early childhood education today is a broader concept than ever before. It includes many approaches, many targets, many justifications. One important issue, therefore, is how to tailor programs to people--how to accommodate programs to the circumstances, values, and goals of

particular families and communities and to the needs and characteristics of particular children. No longer are people searching for the one best program. Now efforts need to be made to maximize the "goodness of fit" between programs and participants. There is one group of participants for whom this may be especially true. In the 1960s, the primary participants in early educational programs were the "culturally deprived." In the 1970s, they were the "socially disadvantaged." In the early 1980s, they were the children of working mothers. Now, there is a new group: infants who are "at risk." To some extent, the difference is merely semantic. Many "at risk" infants are those from poor, black families in which mothers are unavailable. But risk now includes biological risk as well as educational or social deprivation. And risk starts at or even before, birth. At risk are the infants of teenage mothers and older mothers, single mothers and abusive mothers, infants who are premature, underweight, and handicapped. These new targets of our educational efforts require a new set of guidelines for educational programs. When we tried to generalize from middle-class mothers to disadvantaged mothers in the 1960s and 1970s, the fit was not always snug. Now we need to examine the fit as we try to generalize from full-term to premature, from normal to handicapped infants.

But not all targets of current early education efforts are at risk biologically or educationally. There is another new constituency for early education: upwardly mobile yuppie parents, who want designer diapers and designer degrees in Greek, Suzuki, and computer programming for their infants. The superbaby trend raises another set of issues in early childhood education. What are the goals of superbabies' parents--enrichment, acceleration, keeping up with the Joneses, producing prodigies? And what are the effects on their children--short term and long, positive and negative,

cognitive and emotional? We need to monitor and evaluate these programs and determine what this trend means for our children and our future. At the same time, we should be alerted to what may become another trend: superbaby reductio ad conceptum. Mothers-to-be today are massaging their pregnant abdomens, exposing their fetuses to Bach and Beethoven, reading great literature aloud in measured tones, and murmuring sweet nothings to increase their unborn infants' motivation and self-esteem (for example, at the Prenatal University in Haywood, California). It's a logical extrapolation: from elementary school to preschool, from preschool to infancy, from infancy to the womb. We press ever backward in our educational efforts. We urgently need to monitor and evaluate the effects of these efforts.

Perhaps the most pressing issue in early education today, however, is not programs for specially targeted minority groups--whether high risk or high income--the most pressing issue is the one facing the majority of the population. That is the issue of day care for infants. The fastest growing segment of employed mothers these days is mothers with infants between 3 weeks and 3 months of age. If things continue as they are, soon half of the mothers of infants in this country will be working. The question of what is best for the infants of these working mothers is a major concern of parents and professionals in psychology, education, and child care. It is also a controversial issue--one which is still far from resolved (Belsky, 1986; Phillips et al., in press).

There is an urgent need for researchers to investigate the effects of full-time and part-time day care on infants' development, particularly on their emotional well-being and their relationships with their parents. There is a need to find out whether it makes a difference what kind and quality of day care infants are in. There is a need to develop optimal curricula for

infant care. It is impossible to extrapolate to infant care programs from the results of research on curricula in preschool programs, care for infants in hospital nurseries, or maternal care of infants at home. Infant day care is a new field--one that needs continued program development (i.e. formative research) as well as continued evaluation of outcomes (i.e., summative research). There is also a need to be concerned about the selection and training of caregivers for infant day-care centers. We need more than fingerprinting and early childhood degrees as criteria for hiring. We need new guidelines for hiring and for training infant care workers in day-care centers. Similarly, we need to investigate how in-home sitters and day-care home providers can be trained or inspired to offer educational experiences to their infant charges (e.g., day-care home networks and television programming). We most urgently need to investigate how infant care facilities, whether homes or centers, can be continuously monitored and evaluated.

These contemporary issues in early childhood education demand both attention and careful research--just as those of 5, 10, 15, and 20 years ago did. We need to do research with large and representative samples, using experimental designs whenever possible, following children longitudinally, assessing social-emotional and ecological effects as well as effects on cognitive development, and investigating the processes of early education programs as well as the outcomes. In 1987, our naivete and our funds are greatly diminished. But the issues we face are just as important, just as pressing, as those a decade or two ago. If we are cautious in our claims and earnest in our efforts, we can get some answers and settle today's urgent issues before the next decade rolls around and the issues shift again. That should be our immediate goal.

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