PRESCHOOL: A BEGINNING OR AN EXTRA

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The "preschool" child has been an intriguing and fascinating subject for educators and psychologists since the 16th century. The "preschool" child, so termed as a semantic insult, (Caldwell, 1970), was studied and researched to discover the development and nature of man. The European educators were somewhat surprised to find the young children capable of a great deal of learning. From Comenius to Montessori, the educators found that very young children develop learning habits and patterns that follow them for a lifetime. (Caldwell, 1970) They discovered that social status, community customs, and economic level greatly influenced how a child learned and what he learned. The results were plain; early education could be of some benefit to almost all children. Frederick Froebel began kindergartens in Germany. The schools practiced Froebel's concept that very young children needed a place to be nurtured and allowed to blossom and learn by doing. German immigrants brought the idea to the United States in the middle of the 19th century. By the end of that century there were many private kindergartens here, and finally, early 20th century saw kindergartens in public schools. So the five year olds were no longer considered preschool, it became the beginning of formal education in most areas of our country. The high level of interest in the very young child waned for several decades, but it suddenly surfaced again after the studies of several men were made known and the influence of some social factors were being felt.

In 1958, the results of a study by Samuel Kirk were published. This
was a huge study that involved preschool retarded children. The study showed positive results in academic and language learning overall, and started renewed interest in the preschool child among researchers and educators. His research also showed that the children did not maintain the advantages they had gained over children that did not receive special training. (Kirk, 1958)

A short time later in the 1960's, the research of Benjamin S. Bloom was being reviewed very carefully, (Bloom, 1964). Bloom had carefully gathered and studied 1300 case studies of children and he found that the most rapid period of development in children is in the first five years of life. Around the same time Hunt challenged the belief of fixed intelligence and predetermined development, (Caldwell, 1970). He felt that stress in education should be placed on the importance of experiences in the development of a child. The experiences that would be structured to expose the child to materials and events that normally would be beyond the child's everyday life. All of this information pointed to the value of cognitive stimulation in the early years of a child for higher intellectual performance as an adult. The research combined with a changing society and social problems started a rediscovering of the preschool child. The civil rights movement brought forth protests against unfavorable environmental conditions for minority races, including the quality of education. President Johnson started his “war on poverty” in the middle sixties to change and overcome the environmental problems of preschoolers from culturally deprived situations. Operation Head Start began as a preschool program all across the nation for these children. Research was designed into the program to find out as soon as possible how effective it was for the children. The first results were excellent, especially in areas of language and social development. However, follow-
up studies showed that the gains made immediately following the preschool program were not evident three years later. The children became part of the group without great gains ahead of their classmates. So preschool education has fallen into the background somewhat again, but a truer and more realistic view is that preschool education has been put into the proper perspective. Head Start was to be a miracle worker for the children of the poor and minority families, but it did not work miracles. It did give the children the chance to become part of the norm in public school.

Children of the three, four, and five year age group can be given experiences that provide a common background for them to build on in the public school system. It may prevent some deficiencies or, at least, give the children from culturally different environments a chance to know something about the educational system of our schools, and prepare them for the school experience. (Weikhart, 1967)

One area of great interest has been the research and studies done on the effect of preschool on retarded children. Skeels, Dye, Kirk, Spiker, Hodges, and McCandles all did research in this area and all found that there were some positive results from preschool education. However, the research has not been done to show how longlasting the effects really are. (Frierson, Johnson, 1970) Some of the studies have shown that the great gains are not evident in later years, but the research is not complete nor valid enough to stand alone without further work being done. (Caldwell, 1970).

Several factors have been discovered during the course of research of preschool education that points to valid reasons for having very young retarded children exposed to stimulating school experiences. One factor is that the children exposed to preschool classes develop better socialization skills. The experiences in the classroom provide opportunities
to interact with a peer group as well as adults that are involved in several professions. Through the interaction the children can learn responsibility, how to follow directions, how to obey rules, and public behavior that will build into patterns for their entire lives.

Another factor beginning to become noticeable is that these children can gain skills that will prepare them for the classroom in public schools. (Bellamy, Bellamy, 1974) There is an argument for maturity development over training here, however, stimulation and training seem to be having some positive effects. It does seem to defer the deficits of their handicaps to some extent. It may even prevent further handicaps from developing or change bad habits and directions of development to good habits.

So that I could find out more about the preschool child, especially a child that is developmentally slow, I volunteered to work at Hillcroft. Hillcroft is the complex that is operated by the Delaware County Association for Retarded Citizens. It contains three preschool classrooms, a sheltered workshop for adult clients, and complete evaluation and testing services for adult placement for work.

In the preschool class, I was to be a teacher's assistant and work with the children, observe them, take note of their levels of development, and notice what they needed to learn. I began as an observer and later taught part of the time.

There were eight children in the class; six boys and two girls. They were all three and four years old, except for two children that were six and would be going to public special educational classes in the fall. I had no other data about the children. However, their tested levels showed that they were functioning overall on the 18 months level.

The school day began at 9:00 and ended at 1:00 in the afternoon. During the morning opening session the children worked on various kinds of
personal information. They needed to learn to say their own names and how old they were. They also did rote counting, colors, teaching pictures, and many other language enrichment activities.

The preschool program provided speech therapy for the children both as a group and individually. The group lesson was for half an hour each day. The therapist worked on language elaboration with the group by doing play and game activities. Each child that needed special work was scheduled for an individual lesson each day.

After a snack and a relaxing activity, the children worked on individualized folders. Each child was given individual attention by the teacher while the rest of the class worked puzzles, zipper and buttoning boards, and other visual and fine motor activities. This time is one aspect of the schedule that demonstrated what an outstanding program is being offered to the children. The individual folders consisted of worksheets, paper and pencil activities, prewriting activities, peg boards, and cutting exercises chosen for each child on his level of developmental need. At the beginning of the year, each child had been assessed to find his level of performance. From these assessments, the children's individual work was planned as well as group lessons that included skills that everyone needed. The children were assessed in five areas: motor, fine motor, self-help skills, academic skills, and socialization, for present level performances. All of the work was appropriate and the children were given something that they could do and learn from in their folders. It made their work special so they were very willing to do that work.

Immediately following individual work came the group work, usually unit work. The class were taught a lesson and then they would do an activity at their seats. After the short lesson, everyone got washed for lunch. This was another learning experience for the little ones, and for myself. Washing one's hands can be very difficult work when all the
muscles involved don't want to cooperate. Finally, a hot lunch was served from the building's cafeteria. The lunch was prepared and served by the workshop employees. They took care of the little ones. The lunches were also a learning experience for the children. They were learning to sit still, eat their food well, and handle eating utensils in the correct manner. It appeared that they needed some instruction and help in this area. Some days the floor and the table of the cafeteria were covered with crumbs and spills, but they usually managed fairly well.

The time after lunch was used to brush teeth, wash up, rest, and play with toys. The last twenty minutes of the day were spent in gross motor activities or playing outside on the playground equipment. The gross motor stations were designed to help these youngsters gain general coordination and bring them up as far as possible to their age level. Most of the children were assessed at being around 18 months in gross motor skills.

There was one other planned activity that I felt was extremely good for the children and appeared to be an excellent learning experience. Every Friday all three classrooms went on a field trip together. While I was in the school, we went to the airport, to several farms in one day, and to a large park to play on the larger playground equipment. These experiences were valuable in many ways. All week before the trip, the things that they were going to see were discussed and incorporated into group lessons. The trips provided opportunities for the teacher to bring out aspects of the childrens' environments that they could share in group discussion. The children were also learning to behave in a large group, and why rules are so important to them.

The schedule was busy and every child knew that he had come to school to work. The teachers had planned the activities so they were appropriate for the children and so they were all learning experiences that would help
them move toward their educational goal.

Because of the research in the preschool area, there were two areas of the curriculum that I felt I should be more aware of and make careful observations. (Spicker, Hodges, McCandles, 1968) The areas are oral language and socialization. In the area of oral language, the children were given a great deal of stimulation and work on learning a more elaborate language. The group speech session helped a great deal as did the individual speech lessons. Two of the children had very little language at all, and the others all had some sort of speech problem, mainly articulation. However, the one boy that had almost no language could say his full name and the teacher indicated that he had not been able to do that for very long. There was ample opportunity for the children to share ideas and express themselves with oral language and I think the preschool experience is good for that reason alone.

Socialization was the other area of particular attention. This one area was as big a problem for these children as any other learning area. Learning to interact with a peer group, adults, to be responsible for their own actions, learning that there are rules to follow, and even following directions, were extremely difficult and often beyond their capabilities. I observed that there were many levels within each child for the various socialization skills. They were up and down in levels of frequently, also. Most of the time, it was easy to see that this was an area of need for each child. The teacher handled each child individually as to what lessons they needed. These learnings were handled mostly during the group time first thing in the morning. All of the children were made aware of the group and the environment around them. They were also made aware of their responsibility to that environment. They were reminded often and well that they were in school; school was a place for work, learning, and
fun, while also being a place where there were other people to consider around them. It was an important observation for me to see one little boy bite or hit a classmate, turn off the lights, or take something away from someone six times in the space of ten minutes. He would commit the act and then watch the victim for a reaction. He was truly fascinated by the children's responses. The teacher tried several ways to stop his harmful behavior and finally found that a time-out place worked the best. His harmful behavior decreased each day after that. However, the biting and hitting was a learning experience for him; it was just too painful for his classmates to allow it to go on. He learned about other people and what they felt by being in the classroom with them. All the children benefitted from the opportunity to relate to peers and adults outside the immediate family or circle of friends.

I felt the preschool program was very good and accomplished a great deal for the children. It is a diagnostic-prescriptive program rather than traditional nursery school curriculum. It definitely was not a day care program that merely babysat for the kids. All of the teachers worked very hard and diligently to prepare lessons and teach the children.

From the observations that I made in this preschool program, I think that formal education for retarded children cannot begin too soon. The DARC also provides for home visits by teachers to children that have either been identified by their doctors as retarded or referred by social workers from high risk families. The home visits start immediately after a baby has been identified and referred. These visits help begin a child on patterns that can help balance deficits and prevent some further handicapping during early childhood.

In effect, the education of some retarded children begins at birth. However, the early educational programs have been sponsored and provided
for by non-profit organizations, such as the Association for Retarded Citizens. The new law 94-142 makes education mandatory for retarded children from three years of age to twenty-one years, if normal children are provided with that many years of public education. Here in Indiana, education is provided from five years to eighteen years for regular children. This fall, 1978, moderately to severely retarded children will be allowed in public school kindergarten or special education classrooms for the first time in Muncie. I believe the problem arises in the coordination of the preschool effort with the public school classrooms, either regular or special classrooms. The trend now is to mainstream or integrate all the mentally handicapped children possible for several good reasons. However, the preschool program is very individualistic and child focused and when they enter a public classroom many curriculums are not taught that way. They use a more traditional method of making levels in the classroom and teaching to the group norms. Retarded children learn little or nothing incidentally, so they need a great deal of individual attention and personally prescribed work. The needs are clear; a continuation of the preschool program for all mentally handicapped children in the public schools. (Bronfenbrenner, 1975)

Mentally handicapped children need a special curriculum designed to help them live comfortable and useful lives. The preschool at Hillcroft had such a program. Handicapped children must be specifically taught the most everyday routine functions. At the preschool level, the children should be taught about themselves and about taking care of themselves. They need self help skills and enough perceptual motor discrimination to carry out simple tasks. The children should know some personal information, such as their full name.

For the developmentally slow, the curriculum should be structured
so that they are being taught skills for daily living. Included in the curriculum, I feel, should be application of as many skills as possible. If the children can apply what they learn as they learn it, it might be possible for them to develop continuity of thinking. It might be possible for application to help in problem solving. Teachers sometimes feel that providing experiences means just that, "show and tell" for the students. It is at this level that the children must begin to learn their capabilities and be given the opportunity to use their own talents to the fullest. The curriculum that provides for an individualized approach will give each child those opportunities. The preschools for special children are usually planned this way. When special children begin public school classes, this type of curriculum should be carried on. The learnings should begin to branch out to cover the child's place in the world, how to deal with the environment, and finding out what choices he will have in his life. He also needs as much knowledge in the academics as he can learn, such as numbers and reading. For the moderately and mildly retarded in special classes, this is the usual method of instruction. I believe, however, that sometimes the slow learner or very mildly handicapped children can become lost in the shuffle of regular education classes. There are several methods for helping regular teachers plan for special children including itinerant teachers, resource rooms, and special educators. The regular teachers themselves must understand and know the special needs of these children. That would provide continuation of the preschool program through the school years for special children.

One other problem with preschool for mentally handicapped children is the identification of the children for school. (Sower, Covert, 1975) Moderately or severely retarded children can be referred and identified more readily because of organic symptoms. The children that are often over-
looked are the mildly retarded. If the reason for the retardation is socio-
familial, a social worker or a social agency may refer the child, other-
wise they are not found to have learning difficulties until they enter
public school. It is not "too late" then, but the preschool developmental
years have been missed. Other children are mildly handicapped because of
neglect or poor care in the home. Again, the early years and the opportun-
ities for building a lifelong curriculum have been missed. An early identi-
fication program would be helpful to any child with learning problems.

From the research I have read and the month I spent with develop-
mentally slow children in the preschool classroom, I have come to some
definite conclusions. First, early intervention provides some positive
benefits. The preschool stimulation has caused gains in I.Q. scores,
oral language, and socialization skills. These areas have been designated
as the biggest problems for the retarded child to overcome. Language and
socialization are part of the description of a retarded person. Any kind
of experience that will help in those important areas would be good.

Second, I have seen a need for early identification methods to help
all children with learning problems. The first five years of life are be-
lieved to be the years of our most rapid growth and development, so patterns
and habits established then can be crucial to the child for his entire life.
Good, useful, and well taught experiences in that time could provide a
foundation for a comfortable and useful life.

In conclusion, I believe all the information provided and research done
by the educators and psychologists can be used to defend and demand the
channeling of funds to provide preschools for all children, including the
handicapped, mentally and physically. In some states, this service has
been already been provided, however, in Indiana, kindergarten is not re-
quired for mandatory attendance, let alone preschool. Some preschools
are provided by the government in the Head Start program, mainly for the "culturally deprived". The Head Start program has 10% of its funds allotted to all the handicapped children in the area. Of course, other agencies do provide preschools. However, I feel it should be a part of the public school system.

It will be interesting, as an educator, to watch in the future for new developments concerning preschools for retarded children provided as public education. I believe the day will come when formal education will begin at three years of age and continue to be provided for all children for as long as they wish to attend.
REFERENCES


