

DEVELOPMENTS IN PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE IN DAY CARE *

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WE may well ask why the sudden thrust for intellectual development of the young? This seems to be but one aspect of a total cultural change that is affecting not only this country but all countries around the world. Such drastic and comprehensive change is not attributable to any single cause, but rather to innumerable, inter-related causes.

In the field of medicine for instance, science has shown the way to check many diseases at their source, so that more infants live to adulthood, and life expectancy is greatly increased. Improved nutrition and better environmental sanitation have also been factors in changing attitudes from an emphasis on the cure of illness and disease to one of prevention. With this change in emphasis, the early years of childhood have become identified as the key preventive years. Once the young child's health is assured, it is now recognized that a groundwork has been laid which greatly enhances the possibility of good health for an individual's remaining years.

Other contributing factors to the re-discovery of the young, the so-called

"pre-school" child and his potential, are:

- The population explosion and population movement into cities.
- The re-evaluation of our public school system.
- The rise in delinquency and the search for its causes.
- The acute problem of drop-outs from school at earlier and earlier years.
- The phenomenon of earlier marriages and larger families.
- The stimulation of us all by new mass media of communication.

Change became the order of the day—the crust of status quo thinking was shattered—requiring us to re-evaluate our goals and activities, our institutions and our new communities. We ask, "What's new?" We answer, "Most everything."

Stimulated by such change, each of the professional fields has extended its scope, intensified its research and deepened its insights; each in turn has stimulated and influenced the others. As the field of health for example began to encompass a new totality of health, it included not only the physical health of the body but mental and emotional health as well and inevitably their inter-relatedness also. Recognition of the whole child as a member of an entire

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family with roots in a given community began to have increasing meaning. To enter the space age man had to have total health, as well as vigor, intelligence, courage and initiative.

Similarly the fields of education and of social work extended their reach and deepened their concern and came alive as never before. They began to put aside their rivalries and begin a new partnership.

In the not-so-remote past, education had been conceived as being strictly limited to cerebral activity in the purist sense. Learning was considered to be exclusively an intellectual achievement. Through intensive training, discipline and memorization, education was achieved—but only *after* one had attained the age of six or seven. When compulsory universal education laws had finally been achieved throughout the United States early in the twentieth century, the so-called “pre-school” child was by-passed. In the thinking of that day he was not yet ready to become educated, not yet ripe for learning. In fact it was obvious that he was not considered educable, according to the meaning of education of that time. The young child’s spontaneity was too hard to harness, his natural inclination to play was merely tolerated as a frivolous aberration in his early years.

As education research delved into the *process* rather than the mere *measurement* of learning, tremendous, far-reaching new vistas were opened. What had been thought to be a static I.Q. proved to be a quite flexible I.Q., particularly in the early years. The further discovery was made that during the first five years of life more rapid and more significant learning probably takes place than in any other comparable five-year period in an individual’s life. And play was found to be the medium through which the young child learned. The ef-

fect of environmental influences on the child’s ability to use this newly discovered potential to its fullest capacity was also an amazing discovery.

Thus the concepts of education were stretched far beyond their earlier restrictive boundaries to include all ages, from the beginning to the end of life, and to explore many new approaches. The concept of education was extended far beyond the memorization of facts and figures and obedience to authority, to the learning of attitudes and values. To use, develop and enjoy the release of one’s creative and constructive ideas, gradually to gain skill and sound judgment, bring a deepened sense of responsibility and a growing self-discipline.

Learning, recognized as a gradual process, could now no longer be restricted to the school alone. The child’s health, education and welfare became inseparable ingredients of a good life. All were enhanced or defeated by the environmental conditions and influences that surrounded him, whether in his home, his school or his community—and at every age, but particularly in his earliest most vulnerable years.

Through President Johnson’s Anti-Poverty Program and the amazing response of the public across the nation to Project Head-Start, we are coming to the sharp realization that the time is ripe for an even fuller recognition of the meaning and importance of the early years of childhood by the public at large. Highlighting the priority needs of the disadvantaged child of the impoverished family, we are moving rapidly toward the concept that society has an obligation to protect and enhance every child’s right to grow and develop to his maximum capacity; and that the young child in his own unique way is profoundly educable. We are agreed that his early years will effect him for all the years that follow. His rediscovery as a

“VIP,” is based on the concept that the early years are important not only to the individual and to his future, but to society as a whole.

What then, many are asking, are the negatives in the present situation for the young child. Ought we to teach the three R's at earlier and earlier stages of his development to make maximum use of his appetite for learning? Knowing that his potential for learning is far greater than we had thought and the rate of his learning more rapid, should we press to have him learn as much as possible as quickly as possible? Would we not be exemplary parents and teachers if we pushed him (for his own good, of course) so that he could graduate from college earlier and earlier?

Many of those who have lived long and intimately with young children, whether as parents or as teachers, have deep convictions about the harm that comes from the tensions that inevitably result from undue pressure.

The young child is an explorer, an investigator, an experimenter. He has the inborn incentives of a scientist, of an artist, of a builder. His senses are keen. They have not yet been dulled. He is a pioneer, discovering his new world of both things and people. He is influenced by tangibles as well as intangibles. He needs an environment that invites his interest, that extends his horizons, that offers him both challenge and necessary safeguards, stimulates his questions and helps him to seek and find the answers, gives him the companionship with his peers he requires with the security and protection of wise adult guidance and sympathetic understanding. He enters the space age with enthusiasm and zest. The new horizons grip his imagination. To him they are not frightening, but alluring.

The one thing he does not need is to be pushed or pressured, no matter how bright or alert he may be. External

pressures are very different from his moving into high gear on his own initiative in response to rich, varied and appropriate opportunities. His life should be lived according to his own tempo with a readiness to satisfy his own insatiable curiosities, to satisfy his own urge for communication through word and action. He wants to satisfy his wish to improve his skills whether in physical coordination and growth or in intellectual, social or spiritual growth. Experience in a small group is essential to young children if their needs are to be fully met. A trustworthy, understanding and skillful adult, able to recognize each child's unique and creative potential as well as to be aware of the nature and tempo of group interaction among young children, is equally essential. Such an adult must understand his need to extend his horizon, enrich his experiences, broaden and clarify his concepts.

One great achievement of Project Head-Start is the fact that the groups of four- and five-year-old children (500,000 of them) meeting through July and August this summer are to be limited to fifteen children. Each group is to have a teacher and an assistant (or an aide). Here is an official recognition of the importance of small groups for young children. 12,000 teachers will have undergone training and orientation for this experience in June, 1965.

One danger in Project Head-Start is that our expectations will have risen too high and that there are bound to be some disappointments and some unsuccessful programs. The speed with which the entire program has had to be launched has stirred tremendous hope, and an incredible response! It is as though everywhere people had been waiting for just this opportunity. There has been insufficient time to interpret the program fully to the public but an enthusiasm has been engendered that

seems to be sweeping everything before it. People who participated in the W.P.A. nursery school program after World War I, or the Lanham Act program after World War II, speak over and over about the similarity between those years and the present.

Let us fervently hope that the present program will help to develop deeper roots in the communities themselves and consequently will not be terminated when it comes to the long pull. As the community action program draws the young child and his family into the newly evolving patterns of combined and coordinated health, education and welfare services for those who need and/or want to make use of them, let us make every effort to assure that the roots may be strong enough to sustain it.

Project Head-Start is helping to forward a realization that as education is a continuing process, so the early years of nursery school, kindergarten and primary years should be a continuum. And as home and school have each an investment and deep concern for every child, so their partnership must be strengthened. This goes far, far beyond the concept of open school days, once a year, or the PTA meetings, and an occasional parent-teacher conference. It means a truly joined understanding and effort by parents and teachers throughout the school year.

There is also a present and future danger, to my way of thinking, in the setting up of special programs for children from disadvantaged and impoverished homes, that a new form of segregation of the children of the poor is being engendered. It is of the utmost importance that after the current priority needs of disadvantaged children are met to a degree by the Anti-Poverty program, on-going plans for the group care of all the pre-school children in each neighborhood will be based on the democratic principle that the children

of each community gather together to learn from each other, as well as from their teachers. May this be achieved regardless of race, color, creed or economic level so that all children may learn what it means to live together in a democracy whether rich or poor, black or white.

There is already evidence that some public school systems are becoming alerted to the public interest and concern for the opening of nursery schools as well as kindergartens and child care centers for all children from 3 to 6, as part of the public school system. Here the close cooperation of public and private efforts should make much headway.

We are living in an era of change, more rapid than man has ever experienced before. It is affecting every person living on this earth. The young child of today will probably grow up in a world of continuous and possibly accelerated change. He will need all the health and fortitude, the imagination and realism, the courage and flexibility that we can help him to acquire. As we broaden our own concerns and deepen our insights we must be alert and sensitive to the crucial importance of freeing our children for the fullest possible development of their capacities and potentialities.

Even UNICEF is preparing to make the coming year, the year of the young child, in all the developing countries. The young child is acquiring status not only for himself but also as a family and a community member, in a movement that encircles the globe.

Dr. James L. Hymes, Jr., Professor of Education at the University of Maryland, has been on leave from that university to serve as Consultant in Early Childhood Education to Project Head-Start in Washington, D. C. He has said,

The role of education in day care has been severely limited in the past by the

crushing burden of two fundamental misconceptions. The first of these misconceptions is that many have believed, falsely, that children under six are not educable. These under-six years have been seen as waiting years, empty years, a time when the child needed only care and protection. The second of these misconceptions is that many have believed, falsely, that education was the equivalent of the 3 R's. Education meant a talking teacher, education meant sitting children. In this misconception education had to begin sometime after age six.¹

Psychiatrists and many pediatricians have long known these misconceptions. Similarly, some educators, social workers and lay people. The total must be much larger than any of us have realized, judging by the widespread consensus of support to the decision to eradicate poverty by concentrating on the improvement of the education of the very young.

The true identification is with the goal: the development of a constructive healthy total human. Day care has only one choice: Will it offer good education or bad? Or worded differently: Will it offer conscious education, or unconscious unplanned education-by-choice? Young children in groups inevitably are learning the most basic lessons about themselves, about other people, about the world they live in, about learning itself, about authority, about the values that will guide their actions.

Nursery education has long known this, and good nursery education has acted upon this understanding. Now is the time, in this year of decisions, for day care to make this fifty-year-old understanding its own. The fact of the matter is: No matter why children happen to come to a center, no matter how long they stay once they are there, the

program of the center and the group experiences children have, must become identical, be that center called "day care" or "nursery school" or no matter what its name.

Young children in group day care need trained nursery school teachers to guide their experiences throughout the whole of their day. They need the equipment and the space and the program that has long been known to tap the learning and growth and developmental potential of 3's, 4's and 5's. I would make only one distinction: children in day care, our nation's most vulnerable children, have a legitimate claim to the best of these teachers, the best of equipment, the best of space, the most desirable of group size and of adult-child ratio.

Today's mobilization of a consensus on these wiser, sounder propositions— young children can and do learn, education is concerned with the whole child—must lead to some changes in practice, if the promise of this time is not to be lost.

Maybe most important, we in the professions most involved must have a change in attitude. As an educator, I plead for more eagerness on the part of my profession to play its full, responsible role. But more important: As a specialist in child development, I plead for much more cooperative and integrated arrangements between welfare, health, and education. We must not let our state and federal historic administrative arrangements, perhaps fitting for a past that was quiescent, stand in the way of progress in a present that is alive with concern for the young child.

In this time of ferment and change, I plead that we do not yet crystallize our administrative arrangements. Most especially, I urge that we do not settle too early and too firmly on the decision that day care must be the concern primarily

¹ James L. Hymes, Jr., "Education—An Essential Component of Day Care," *The Newsletter of the National Committee for the Day Care of Children, Inc.*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1965), New York.

of welfare. Such a decision is certainly premature.

I plead for an open-endedness in our arrangements because the great opportunity now is to move day care into the permanent fabric of our life. Certainly we all must recognize that this is a problem which can never be solved under private auspices. One can thank the wonderful people in private agencies who have served the past so valiantly; one can hope that for the future they will play the proper role of private agencies, as pace-setters, beacon lights showing the best. But day care must become fundamentally a public concern, a permanent public concern.

At this moment the great source of support is federal money. This almost surely cannot last. One challenge is to use this momentary lift, not as a time to relax but as the time for the greatest effort to secure state and local support for day care. As we make this effort we face the second challenge: to secure that state and local support through the channels that give the greatest assurance of permanence and of adequacy of support. Unless we face these two challenges and react wisely, today's significant advances may prove to be only "a flash in the pan," a one-shot momentary advance. Should that sad outcome re-

sult, 1965 will be remembered not as a time of advance but as the year of wasted opportunity.

What then, you may well ask, is the role of the Jewish community center in serving its youngest citizens? Rooted in a rich and meaningful cultural, philosophical and religious origin it now has the double responsibility of drawing on its historical past while simultaneously opening its heart and mind to the basic principles of a multi-faceted democracy.

Dedication to one's faith—when it represents one set of morals and spiritual values and principles can only be enriched by an open and generous exchange of ideas and ideals with those of other faiths and heritages.

Children can accept such a concept more readily than most adults. Living fully in a democracy does not require the isolation of one's treasured ideas and ideals to the exclusion of all else, but it does require that those of differing religions and philosophies find common meeting grounds and the broader base on which inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness can become increasingly real.

The young child readily understands the natural communion possible between all children, if only the adults can be equally wise.