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AUTHOR: Cupp, Janet R.
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ABSTRACT

The instructional program of the Demonstration and Research Center for Early Education (Darcee) preschool is discussed in terms of the skill development objectives of the curriculum and the role which content plays in the instructional program. The primary purpose of the program is to implement research activities through a curriculum sequentially organized to realize the goals of the research design. The goal of the research design is to develop in the preschool disadvantaged child the aptitudes and attitudes which past research has shown to be correlated with academic achievement. The skill development program is concerned with teaching children how to: (1) experience stimuli more fully (perceiving, decoding and encoding sensory stimuli); (2) organize their experiences systematically (association, classification, and sequencing); and (3) express their experiences more precisely (verbal communication). The primary focus of the curriculum is not on the learning of specific information, but on skill development. It is assumed that a unit approach is the most effective in teaching content. (MS)

An Instructional Program for 3 and 4 Year Old Disadvantaged Children

Demonstration and Research Center for Early Education
George Peabody College for Teachers
Janet R. Cupp

The instructional program of the DARCEE preschool is research-oriented. Its primary purpose is to implement research objectives on a minute-to-minute, day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year basis through a curriculum sequentially organized to realize the goals of the research design. As has been stated, the goal of the research design is to develop in the preschool-age disadvantaged child the aptitudes and the attitudes which past research has shown to be correlated with academic achievement. Our responsibility is to develop an instructional program aimed at socialization for competence--preparation for moving into a highly-competitive society. Because of time limitations, this paper will cover only the curriculum area concerned with aptitude or skill development.

The instructional program for developing aptitudes for achievement will be discussed in two sections. The first section will give an overview of the skill development objectives of the curriculum. The second section will present the role which content plays in the instructional program.

I. Skill Development

Aptitudes for achievement have been divided into three major groups: first, the concepts and skills necessary to perceive and decode stimuli; second, the skills utilized in organizing and integrating stimuli; third, the skills required to express the end product of the decoding and organizational processes. Each skill within these groups has been programmed according to two sequential dimensions. First, a given skill is sequenced along a vertical continuum from a gross, general, elementary level of discrimination and differentiation to a specific, precise, complex level of development. Second at each vertical level of sophistication, a skill is programmed horizontally along a continuum from the acquisition of the skill at the concrete to the abstract level, moving through the overlapping perceptual, conceptual, and language phases of learning. The projected end result of the horizontal and vertical sequential dimensions is a very firm command of each skill at a high level of complexity, sophistication, and abstraction at the verbal level--in other words, socialization for competence. This skill development program will be outlined by taking each of the three skill divisions and enumerating the skills and their components.

The first sub-division of the skill development program, concerned with teaching children how to experience, can be labeled "Input." Here the curriculum has been designed to help children perceive, decode, and encode stimuli which they receive through all the sensory channels--visual, auditory, tactile-kinesthetic, taste-olfactory, motor, and affective. Ability to learn through each of these channels is predicated on many basic percepts, concepts, and skills in exploring novel stimuli.

Visual Discrimination includes all basic concepts and skills which rely initially on information received through the visual channels—concepts of color, shape, size, volume, time, quantity, position; skills in likeness and difference perception, patterning, and whole-part-whole relationships involved in puzzle and design work. The area of Auditory Discrimination is comprised of concepts of volume and pitch; comprehension of whole thoughts; whole-word discrimination of rhyming and non-rhyming words; part-word discrimination of beginning and ending word sounds. The area of Tactile-Kinesthetic Discrimination includes development of concepts of texture, weight, and temperature. Taste-Olfactory Discrimination is concerned with developing general concepts of taste (sweet, sour, etc.) and specific concepts of flavors and their sources. Concepts of motion and speed are the components of the Motor Discrimination area. The area of Affective Discrimination was established to develop concepts of emotions.

The skills included under each sensory area are ordered sequentially to develop finer and more precise discrimination in the capacity to experience and in the ability to decode and encode the stimuli received. For example, in the area of Auditory Discrimination, polar concepts of volume and pitch are introduced for gross sound identification—loud-soft, high-low. These general concepts are refined as the comparative (louder-softer, higher-lower) and superlative (loudest-softest, highest-lowest) distinctions are introduced. Eventually sounds with these descriptions are identified according to their sources. Decoding of verbal sounds is stressed continually during the program. Through the association of a word with its referent and the dramatization of position concepts, the child learns to decide simple directions given verbally by the teacher. The complexity of directions is gradually increased by demanding more precise responses and by multiplying the number of directions in a specified sequential order. As the child's verbal repertoire is increased, he is lead to comprehend stories with visual aids and later without the visual crutches. As soon as the child can decode whole thoughts, whole-word discrimination is introduced. The child is asked to listen for a certain word in a word sequence and to indicate recognition with an appropriate gesture. The word lists are introduced sequentially so as to demand increasingly finer auditory discrimination by making the words of a sequence more similar over time until only the initial consonant sounds differ. This procedure offers a natural transition into the introduction of rhyming. Activities are planned to develop skills in the decoding, encoding, and production of rhyming words. Following this work with whole-word discrimination, part-word discrimination skills are introduced stressing likenesses and differences in beginning consonant sounds. When one-letter sound distinctions can be discriminated, the child is ready for work in sound-letter association in direct preparation for reading.

The second sub-division of the skill development program is concerned with "Organization." The skills of Association, Classification, and Sequencing are critical in the assimilation of experiences (the integration of present with past experiences) into some logical and orderly framework to facilitate quick retrieval of information and to foster transfer of learning. Here, as with the "Input" skills, the curriculum is organized to develop increasingly more sophisticated schemata for organizing information to encourage the continuous segmenting and differentiation of the child's cognitive field.

Association skills involve the ability to build connections between concepts at many levels of difficulty and abstraction. The elementary sensory concepts are associated to develop higher-level concepts. For example, concepts of color, shape, size, quantity, texture are used as building blocks to form the concept of a particular animal. Through planned lessons a child is directed to associate certain concepts with a common characteristic to form a class of concepts defined by the particular characteristics. Finally, classes of concepts are associated to draw relationships.

We work on the assumption that Classification abilities develop through the process of association. The child learns to classify deductively by sorting concepts with a common characteristic into their appropriate categories which are identified by the teacher. He then learns to classify inductively, by abstracting a shared characteristic of given concepts and formulating the class defined by the common characteristic. Activities are sequenced to increase the amount of conceptual differentiation demanded of the child and to move the child from the classification of concrete or representational materials to the classification of verbal labels at the language level.

Sequencing abilities are the tools used by the child to order experiences in a logical pattern. Motor sequencing is developed through dramatization of the action patterns in stories, daily activities, etc., and through the execution of a sequence of verbal directions. Vocal sequencing is encouraged through activities concerned with learning the ordering in rote counting, days of the week, seasons of the year, ordinal position labels, and through the verbal sequencing of episodes of familiar stories and events or activities which the child has experienced. Eventually the child is encouraged to develop his own stories exhibiting a sequence of events in a logical order.

The third sub-division of the skill development program, "Output," is comprised of skills necessary for effective verbal communication and expression of thought patterns. Here the objectives are concerned with both quantity and quality of verbalization. The learning milieu of the classroom is organized to stimulate individual expression. Each child spends approximately two-thirds of his time in a small group situation with four other children and a teacher. Individual expression is constantly reinforced with verbal praise and often with some concrete reward, and/or gesture of approval. Many lessons are planned and many instructional devices are utilized to augment the quantity of verbalization. Conversation of child with teacher and child with child is encouraged particularly in small groups during the snack and lunch periods.

Quality in verbalization is developed through the use of very carefully programmed reinforcement schedules to realize continuous improvements in articulation and in sentence structure. The child is reinforced for closer and closer approximations of complete sentence structure in encoding declarative (affirmative and negative) and interrogative statements. Lessons are planned whereby the child can develop the ability to use present, past, and future tense forms in actual situations. Certain sentence patterns are reinforced because they demonstrate evidence of complex thinking operations: negative statements used in classification activities to indicate concepts

which do not belong to a designated class; comparative statements used to describe the relationship between two objects exhibiting comparative forms of polar concepts of size, texture, weight, etc., "if-then" statements used to state deductions when certain qualifying conditions are given; statements with "or" used to imply choice. Succinctness of expression is developed by encouraging the child to reduce redundancy in consecutive sentences through consolidation of adjectives, verbs, and nouns using the coordinating conjunction "and."

Use of "standard" grammatical forms and sentence patterns (a reflection of environment and thought process) is secondary in importance to the ability to use many variant forms employed in both the child's environment and a school-type situation. The child is encouraged to decode and encode grammatical and structural alternative forms, a skill without which comprehension handicaps and communication impediments could develop with individuals from differing environments in a later school-learning situation.

II. Content

As previously stated, the primary focus of the curriculum is not on the learning of specific information, but is on the development of skills needed to experience stimuli more fully, to organize experiences more systematically, and to express experiences more precisely. The content of the curriculum, therefore, is subsidiary in importance to the development of the skills; however, because content is the medium through which skills are developed, it must be chosen with consideration given to skill development potential.

A unit approach for ordering content was adapted on the assumption that learning situations organized around a central theme would encourage more meaningful learning for the child. In addition, it would aid the teacher in sequencing the learning situations in an order of increasing complexity and abstraction following the perceptual, conceptual, and language continuum.

The sequence of units was based on the sequence of the skill development program--moving continually from the general and gross to the specific and concise levels of skill development and moving learning through the perceptual, conceptual, language continuum at each skill level. Initially, units were selected which provided opportunities for the development of basic sensory concepts in very concrete situations; subsequent units utilized these basic learning skills and concepts to build higher level concepts and to develop skills in organizing experiences. By using an inter-related unit approach, each successive unit utilizes concepts and skills in each of the preceding units and develops them to a higher level of sophistication. For example, the first unit utilized was about the child and was chosen to develop the basic concepts and skills involved in input, organization, and output of experiences. The content was exciting to the child and obviously offered the most concrete and real situations for learning. The concepts and skills developed here were transferred to and repeatedly utilized in subsequent units on family and home, neighborhood, community helpers, and city. With this inter-related unit approach, basic concepts are continuously reviewed and expanded in breadth and depth. Skills

in experiencing, in organizing experiences, and in expressing experiences become increasingly more refined and sophisticated. The child is steadily carried from proximal to distal situations in space orientation, encouraging the child to move from reliance on perceptual media into the use of conceptual and language media for learning.

Similarly a sequence of units on animals moved the child from the concrete, proximal environment to the abstract, distal environment beginning with pets, followed by farm animals, small woods animals, and finally large wild animals. This series of units provided maximum opportunities for developing association and classification skills using both basic sensory concepts and higher level concepts as the building blocks for class formation.

A series of units on the four seasons provided opportunities to develop concepts and skills basic to seasonal change and to review and expand them over a period of one full year. This series was particularly effective in broadening all sensory concepts and in encouraging the drawing of relationships between seasons as their sequential order was recognized.

Although the units which have been implemented appear very similar to those of most preschools, our curriculum approach is far different. The content itself is not the primary focus; the main thrust is on the aptitude development. The DARCEE instructional program, therefore, makes a pronounced departure from the traditional nursery school program. It is a structure program in which every moment has a designed instructional purpose in terms of an established objective.

The rationale for a structured instructional program which is sequentially programmed and conscientiously implemented is formulated on the basis of previous research projects with disadvantaged children. Studies have consistently indicated that culturally deprived children do not come to school with the experiential background of middle-class children, and, therefore, are placed immediately at a disadvantage. Achievement grades and intelligence scores of these children indicate a pattern of accelerating decline over the school years. In addition, learning studies have shown that deprived children do not learn incidentally but benefit only from intentional instruction. We cannot assume that in the framework of a traditional program these skills for achievement would develop. This view would be a romanticism which we cannot afford.

Our program is designed to meet the particular needs of our children. Rather than accommodating our objectives to match their particular learning deficits, we have established a high goal: to take their very skill weaknesses and develop them into competencies for coping with the environment.

It would be naive to assume, however, that preschool intervention would be a panacea for all the problems which are characteristic of these children. Indeed, results of early intervention projects have shown that gains are not necessarily sustained as the subjects move through the public schools. There

is a crying need for a total system change in our school programs in order to assimilate these groups of very different children. Both attitudes and curricula must be altered if these children are to retain and augment, the competencies which programmed early intervention can develop.