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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature concerning preschool experiences which affect reading development. An attempt is made to isolate and describe experiences which, according to research, enhance reading achievement. Since 1960, many different early childhood education programs have been developed for educationally disadvantaged children. An analysis of the three basic types of curricula for these programs--programmed, open framework, and child centered--reveals that structured prereading programs elicit greater reading gains than the other two formats. Generally, however, research indicates that perceptual, intellectual, emotional, experiential, and language factors have varying degrees of importance with regard to childrens' ability to learn to read. (KS)

The Effect of Preschool Experiences on Achievement in Reading

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This paper consists of a review of the literature in search for the kinds of preschool experiences which have a definite effect on learning to read. The review includes preschool programs as well as children from low-socio economic environments who did not receive such experiences. An attempt will be made to isolate the experiences which according to research, enhance reading achievement.

First grade teachers constantly complain of children coming to them with two to three years of learning retardation. "They aren't ready to learn to read", the teachers say. Some of these children come from low-socio economic homes, yet others come from affluent homes. What is it then that is lacking that causes problems for these children in learning to read? Educators such as Bruner, Bloom and Hunt agree that the first five years of life are important in determining the development of basic competencies. Each educator appeared to support the idea that the environment of the young child could have tremendous influence on the acquisition of competence and coping skills. Karnes (1969) and Weikart et al (1970) found that by age five the average IQ of poor children was at least 5-15 points below that of middle class children. In verbal abilities, poor children were lagging even further behind.

An examination of the causes of such deficits is needed. Murphy (1972) has suggested that children from low-socio level homes do not play with words or materials as middle class children do. These children also do not project sequences of action and then play them out. Parents of

these children use language primarily for social reasons and tend not to use it much for logical reasoning and problem solving.

The ability to auditorily discriminate is hampered by seemingly random noise and movement in the homes of the "disadvantaged" children. The homes have high noise levels, but the children do not receive the repetition, explanation and general pattering of sounds that are needed to develop the capacity to make fine auditory discriminations. The inability to attend to important stimuli fully and to place such stimuli into a meaningful context may be a contributing factor toward difficulty in learning to read.

Wolff (1972) suggests that the disadvantaged child often has no stable representation of the real world, and has no intrinsic motivation to structure and differentiate the world. Disadvantaged children spend less time looking at visual patterns in experimental situations than middle class children, and so visual perception may not be fully developed for learning to read. What the research and educators are saying then is that disadvantaged children show deficiencies in linguistic usage, fine auditory discrimination, visual perception and reasoning ability.

For years it has been known that there is a gap between the performance of disadvantaged and middle class children on intelligence and achievement tests. As the child gets older, the gap increases. There is evidence to show that if intellective training is begun soon enough, before age three, social class does not influence the child's performance (Palmer 1968).

What does research say about the more advantaged child? Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori are only a few of the historical figures who have

worked actively to expand our knowledge of the importance of the child's early experiences. The major efforts of these educators were directed toward slum or so called "disadvantaged" children in various European countries. The impetus in this country prior to the 1960s, however, has been directed toward middle-class children. Zigler (1970) in reviewing some of the research studies of the 1930s and 1940s regarding the effectiveness of preschool education for middle-class children, concluded that there were no cognitive differences, as measured by achievement tests, between middle-class children who attended nursery school and those who did not attend school. The evidence seems to indicate that traditional early education programs did not necessarily accelerate the cognitive development of middle-class children possibly because these programs have emphasized the same kinds of skills that these children were already acquiring in their homes.

Since 1960 many different early childhood education programs have been developed for disadvantaged children. For the purpose of this paper, preschool programs have been placed in one of three types of curricula in order to take a look at the kinds of experiences provided for children in each of the categories. They are: (1) programmed, (2) open-framework, and (3) child centered.

The programmed curricula tend to be directed at clearly defined educational goals, such as the teaching of reading, language and math skills. The curricula tend to be rigidly structured with the teacher dominating the child, and with a heavy emphasis on convergent thinking and learning through repetition and drill. The principles which support these curricula tend to be drawn from learning theory, behavior management procedures,

and language development. Examples of programs using this approach are: Distar, Primary Education of Glaser and Resnick, and Carolyn Stern's Preschool Learning Project.

In the open-framework curricula, the focus tends to be on underlying processes of thinking or cognition, and on learnings which come through direct experiences and actions by the child. There is no specific training in reading or math. These curricula tend to be skeptical of claims that solutions to problems or academic skills can be taught directly to the preschooler. The theory on which these curricula are based delimits the range of preschool activities, giving criteria for judging which activities are appropriate. The child is said to learn by forming concepts through activity, not by repeating what he has been told. The learning process is usually paced by the child himself with adaptation of the activities by the teacher to match the child's needs and interests. Examples of programs using this approach are: Susan Gray's DARCEE, Karnes' Ameliorative Preschool Program, Herbert Springle's Learning to Learn, and Weikart's Cognitive Curriculum.

The child-centered curricula tend to focus on the development of the "whole" child with emphasis on social and emotional growth. There is an open and free environment with a permissive relationship between the teacher and the children. There appears to be a firm commitment to the idea that play is the child's work, and recognition of the child's active involvement in his environment. The curriculum is developed by the teacher and comes mainly from her own intuitive understanding of child development and from the needs of the children. Examples of programs using this approach are: the Tucson Early Education Model, the Responsive Model,

the Durham Education Improvement Project and Headstart.

Although these curricula may appear different, the general goals are similar. The general areas of agreement of goals appropriate for all preschoolers are: (1) the importance of the child's self concept, (2) the importance of the child's interactions with others, (3) developing the child's intellectual abilities, and (4) information-processing skills such as language and sensory perceptual abilities.

A recent review of several studies of the three curricula mentioned concludes that "Preschool programs that provide highly structured experiences for disadvantaged children are more effective in producing cognitive gains than programs lacking these characteristics" (Bissel 1970). This conclusion seems to imply that the programmed and open-framework curricula produce greater cognitive gains for preschoolers than other kinds of curricula.

Let us take a look at some of the effects of structured preschool programs on reading achievement. Gains reported for disadvantaged children in structured reading readiness programs differ significantly from the results found in a California study by Prendergast who compared the development of pre-reading skills in three groups of upper-middle class children. The groups were a conventional day nursery class, a Montessori preschool class, and a non-nursery school group. In most areas evaluated no significant differences were found among the three groups. The researchers attributed this result to the fact that the upper-middle class home environments encourage the development of reading readiness skills without nursery school experiences.

Jo Stanchfield (1972) conducted a study in the Los Angeles City Schools

with approximately 500 children of varying ethnic and socio economic backgrounds. The research sought to determine whether children who were taught pre-reading skills in a structured program would attain significantly higher scores on a standardized reading readiness test than those children who had not been involved in such a program. Pre-reading skills taught in the experimental program were: (1) listening for comprehension, (2) listening for auditory discrimination, (3) visual discrimination skills such as the interpretation of pictures and picture stories, (4) oral language skills, (5) motor perceptual development, and (6) sound-symbol correspondence practice.

The Murphy-Durrell Reading Readiness Analysis was given at the end of the year and revealed that the experimental groups achieved significantly higher scores than the control groups who were not in such a structured program. It was concluded that children taught in a structured sequential program achieve significantly more reading readiness skills than children in a regular kindergarten. The findings of this study and others similar to it seem to suggest that disadvantaged children make greater gains in reading readiness skills than do children from middle-class homes when placed in a structured sequential program. Disadvantaged children do not generally exceed the level of performance of middle-class children, however, on reading readiness tests. It can be reasoned that a year program can not logically be equal to five or six years of a more advantaged educational environment.

Since research does show that structured pre-reading programs for the preschooler show greater gains in reading achievement than do programs that are less structured, a look at the components of such programs is

needed. The kinds of prereading experiences provided differ from one program to another. The areas of general agreement are experiences which develop the following skills: (1) knowledge of the letters of the alphabet, (2) auditory discrimination of sounds, (3) visual discrimination of letters and words, (4) story sequence, (5) love of books, (6) attention to the task and (7) ability to follow oral directions. Providing a child with experiences which are aimed at the development of these skills does not guarantee that the child will effectively learn to read. Mastery of the skills does reduce the possibility of failure in learning to read. Reading is a complex process that no one knows exactly what combination of factors is needed. By examining the research on reading readiness we might conclude, however, that perceptual, intellectual, emotional, experiental, and language factors are important in varying degrees to the ability to learn to read. Any program or home which provides experiences in the development of these areas should enhance the child's ability to learn to read.

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