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ABSTRACT

Described in this document are three stages in the emergence and acceptance in West Germany of the situation-oriented approach to education for "kindergarten" children (ages 3 to 6 years). In brief, this approach stresses learning in real-life situations within the community and values the contributions of children, families, and communities. Specifically discussed are three variants of the approach: the situation approach, the situative approach, and the situation-oriented approach. Respectively, variant approaches emphasize the social sciences; the socialization process; and the integration of socialization, situation, and social sciences. Criticisms of these variants are reviewed, and arguments for the priority of social education in early childhood are offered. It is concluded that (1) the situation-oriented approach and its instructional materials have legitimized preschool education as an academic field and have given it an educational perspective in its own right; (2) research has validated the approach, and criticisms resulting from economic crisis and political conservatism therefore carry little weight; and (3) materials associated with the approach are ready for use in any developed country, and associated methodology may be used for curriculum development throughout the world. An appended chart lists characteristics of each of the variants of the approach. (RH)

PRESCHOOL SOCIAL EDUCATION CURRICULA IN WEST GERMANY: THE SITUATION-ORIENTED APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

Kindergarten work in West Germany (i.e., formal education for 3- to 6-year-old children) has changed dramatically during the last 10 to 15 years. These changes can best be seen in the development, implementation, and evaluation of curricula that have been widely accepted within the frame of kindergarten teaching. In fact, the whole reform movement can be described primarily as a shift from function-oriented approaches to situation-oriented approaches in both kindergarten and preschool work.[1] To introduce the following discussion of situation-oriented curricula, it is first helpful to draw a contrast between these two very different approaches.

A Function-oriented Classroom

In the beginning of the 1970s, a typical Protestant kindergarten classroom in Hannover might involve a single teacher working with a homogeneous grouping of 5- to 6-year-olds. Other teachers "play" with a group of much younger children and with another intermediate group. Between these groups contact is minimal. The older group of children is organized by the most able of the teachers, whose aim is to give them serious preparation for schooling at all cost. The kindergarten has to work constantly to stem criticism that it is neglecting the intellectual capacities of the children: The children must be readied for learning how to read, write, and count. This process includes training in different skills or functions: motor skills, cognitive skills, verbal skills, social skills, etc. The training follows operationalized objectives, is a step-by-step approach that involves all the children as a group, and proves learning success by testing. Especially those children who are deprived socially and intellectually must acquire basic knowledge and skills.

Today the kindergarten teacher is worried. Although everything has been done to promote psychomotor skills, some children are still retarded in their progress. They do not know even how to fold a sheet of paper diagonally. So the teacher prepares an exercise on how to fold a house out of paper, hoping that the children will not only obtain training in psychomotor skills, but also concentrate on one specific material. The sheets of paper are laid out, and the teacher demonstrates how to fold them. The children admire the results. Some are ready to learn how to fold a house. The teacher repeats the demonstration step by step. At the beginning, everybody is eager to follow, but very soon some children become frustrated and begin talking to each other. Heinz seems to have no success at all. He destroys his product: "Rats!" he cries. Others are struggling, but Karin is moving right along: "I've got it!" she cries out. Karin receives most of the attention of the teacher and the group. "I'll take this home to show Mom," she explains. And so the lesson goes on . . .

A Situation-oriented Classroom

By the beginning of the 1980s, the picture in many kindergarten classrooms had changed. A typical situation-oriented classroom in Garbsen near Hannover might involve the teacher's working with a heterogeneous group of 3- to 6-year-old children. Within the kindergarten are three heterogeneous subgroups of children, all with equal status. Every year, part of the group leaves to enter the first grade, and new children come to the group. This procedure retains continuity from year to year. There is contact among the groups with interaction varying according to interests. Each group develops its own program according to the needs and the situations that occur. The kindergarten teacher thinks that

enabling children to deal competently and autonomously within their life situations is the most important learning process in life and is therefore also the most effective preparation for school. The training of functions and skills is limited to the situations in which these skills are needed. Situations such as getting to know one another and one another's families, developing group life, exploring surroundings, dealing effectively with the time outside kindergarten, and solving problems in the neighborhood are considered of primary importance. Classroom work is a continuing process of social learning, and criticism that the kindergarten should incorporate more direct preparation for reading, writing, and counting is answered according to the situation-oriented, personality-centered approach: "Those are not the skills we are here to teach. Let the elementary school do its job, and we will do ours," the teacher would probably answer.

Today the kindergarten teacher observes a scene among the children. The youngsters are role-playing a situation between a security guard and children playing outside a house. "Quick, let's run away," some children cry out, looking around in fear. The child playing the part of the security guard comes nearer: "Damn it, children," he says, "get out of the way. This is not a playground." He shakes his fist in the air, threatening, "I'll tell your parents!" At first, the teacher is mildly amused, but as the children interact she becomes more seriously interested. She realizes that this is not only play; the children are acting out a real experience with a security guard who attacks them verbally whenever they ride their bicycles or roller skate near the house.

Some hours later the kindergarten teachers sit together as a team. They discuss a new theme, the situation "Playing in the Neighborhood."

Lots of information is exchanged: how the parents deal with this situation, experiences of visits with children of the group in different families, the living conditions within the families, how parents deal with dangers on the street, etc. Different projects follow in the next weeks, including mutual visits in the families; special excursions to the neighborhood (to different houses, apartments, modern high-rise buildings, farms); playing kindergarten games at home (my fantasy playground or playhouse). Slowly, problems within this situation are dealt with, and the attitudes of children, parents, and teachers change. The neighborhood is influenced to more fully accept playing children; the situation "Playing in the Neighborhood" is, as these kindergarten teachers would call it, "democratized" (i.e., it gives way to the needs and interests of the children and their parents).

Obviously, these classrooms, described here very briefly (see Kolbe & Wurr, 1981, chapt. 2 and 3), are different. The next section deals specifically with the following questions: What are the major aspects in the process of the reform movement? Which different phases can be described and analyzed? and, How can the present state of preschool education in West Germany best be understood? The third section in this discussion then gives an in-depth study of the situation-oriented approach--its general characteristics and its different schools--outlining criticisms from both within and outside the educational community. To answer these criticisms, arguments from basic research are addressed in a separate section. A concluding statement then refutes the essence of the criticisms, gives new perspectives, and stresses the relevance of the situation-oriented approach for kindergarten work not only in West Germany but also in similar industrialized countries in the east and west and especially in Third World

countries, where the methodology of this approach for developing the early childhood curriculum has already met with some success.

INSTITUTIONALIZED PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN WEST GERMANY: THE REFORM MOVEMENT

Overview

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s a euphoric reform discussion was started in West Germany. The primary question addressed was, What constitutes the ideal preschool education? Educational politics had discovered preschool education. Several factors had come together: different interests and expectations, sociopolitical motifs, research findings, and economic considerations (see Hemmer & Obereisenbuchner, 1979, chap. 1). It was felt that each child should have equal opportunities in education, all capacities of the people should be discovered and developed to the highest possible level, and, perhaps most importantly, the educational level of our industrialized society should be uplifted in order to facilitate technological development in the future. Within this discussion, kindergarten teachers came under heavy attack. They were accused of neglecting the preschool child's cultural development and capacity to learn. Intellectually demanding programs were called for (see Lückert, 1974, pp. 189-273). Those parents who didn't accept the authoritarian practices of traditional pedagogy founded a counter-institution, the Kinderladen, which spread rapidly within the Federal Republic (Breiteneicher, 1971). The German Education Council, while accepting kindergarten as the beginning level of the educational system, considered it necessary to limit kindergarten education to 3- to 4-year-olds and to send 5-year-olds to elementary school (Deutscher Bildungsrat, Bildungskommission, 1970). Many institutions and political parties, as well as

public opinion, supported this proposal. In fact, this proposal marked the beginning of an unprecedented reform movement within the history of early childhood education. The proposal did not limit itself to the development of preschool education as a special academic field, but also included planning, implementing, and evaluating many model projects aimed at identifying optimal learning situations for 5-year-olds. In addition, this proposal fostered the development of curriculum materials, some of which are in use throughout Germany today. In all three of these areas, the reform movement provided not only the impetus for change but also some specific proposals for that change.

The academic field. Preschool education in the beginning of the 1970s was closely tied to elementary education. Facilitating later schoolwork and helping children get a good start in school were of primary concern, and this understanding was reflected in the model projects and the kinds of curriculum materials developed (Belser & Bauerjee-Schneider, 1972).

Toward the beginning of this 15-year reform, another interpretation of preschool education, as "institutionalized education before school" specifically for 3- to 6-year-olds, gained increasing recognition. The emphasis here was on social education and on the development of social skills. Because kindergarten education stopped imitating elementary education and began to find its own identity, preschool education during this period became more and more synonymous with kindergarten education. This identity provided emphasis on the socialization process, a characteristic that clearly distinguishes kindergarten from elementary education (Küchenhoff & Oertel, 1976).

Preschool education today has an even larger meaning. It addresses the child's total learning experience from the beginning of life to the

beginning of first grade. In addition, it includes the effects of various institutions on young children, interactions inside and outside the family, and other academic disciplines that have a bearing on preschool education, and it is as distinct from elementary education as the fields of social work and social education. Preschool education is a discipline in its own right, concentrating on what is good for children before school age. As such, it concerns all educational sciences and deals with the fundamental questions of how people learn and begin to develop their own identities (Kossolapow, 1977).

The model projects. Although one of the original goals of the reform movement was to draw a new boundary between kindergarten and elementary school, the model projects produced results that led politicians from all sides to keep the division as it was. The first strike in this direction was the evaluation of 47 projects by a team of administrators and experts (Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung, 1976). These projects explored different settings: specific age groupings for 5-year-olds in kindergartens, preclasses that included classes of 5-year-olds in the elementary school (the equivalent of the American kindergarten), and special programs integrating 5- and 6-year-olds in the elementary school. The study avoided a clear decision against the original goal, indicating that all model projects have positive effects and that political authorities should therefore ascertain participation of all children in preschool institutions. While such a result might have indicated that there was no need to change the boundary between kindergarten and elementary school, a strictly comparative study of preclasses for 5-year-olds at school and kindergartens with heterogeneous groupings, whose results were published later, established the superiority of the kindergarten program

over preclasses (Minister für Arbeit, Gesundheit und Soziales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1977; Strätz & Schmidt, 1982). Reversing their earlier position, the Länder (state) governments in West Germany (with the exception of the city-states) concurred in the late 1970s in the decision to keep 5-year-olds in the kindergartens, which would then more and more be restructured in family groupings. The reasons for this altered decision were the long term intellectual and general effects on children of kindergarten work and, more specifically, advantages of social learning exhibited by kindergarten children as compared with children in preclasses.

The curriculum materials. During the reform movement, the kindergarten evolved from an endangered species into a widely accepted institution for 3- to 6-year-olds. It legitimized itself as an institution clearly distinct from elementary school. These changes did not occur simply because of the great number of kindergartens established (today almost all children of this age group can attend a kindergarten). A wider understanding of the meaning of preschool education and the positive results of the model projects were also helpful in bringing about this new situation. In addition, the success of such programs was the result of fundamentally new insights into educational concepts. In fact, the newly developed materials and educational approaches--the shifting from function-oriented approaches to situation-oriented approaches and their consequences--were the primary reasons. In this respect, the reform can be subdivided into three phases.

Three Phases of Curriculum Work

Phase 1--Curriculum development: Prevalence of the function-oriented approach. During the first half of the 1970s, when sending 5-year-olds to school was being debated in the ways outlined above, initial programs in

the different Länder concentrated on working conditions and curriculum reform in kindergartens (Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung, 1974). This was the period of developing new curricula. Building on current theories of preschool education, many function-oriented materials were developed (cf. Beiser & Bauerjee-Schneider, 1972; Nitz, 1972). While other approaches were only in the making, function-oriented curricula dominated the scene not only within the model projects but outside as well. These function-oriented curricula were intended to teach the child systematically (i.e., by proceeding step-by-step in such fundamental areas as perception, language, and cognitive skills)--in fact, in all areas where educational psychologists felt able to operationalize instruction. The materials were handed out in files. "Training in files" therefore became synonymous with whatever seemed to be important in preschool education.

Traditional kindergarten work also continued, but it was perceived as having no relevance. The real work was the daily period of training in files. At that period, every child in the so-called "preschool group" within the kindergarten or in any other preschool institution had to participate. Parents had to obtain information if their child was ill so that the child could do his or her training in files at home, and the training in files had to be repeated as many times as necessary. Great emphasis was placed on mastery of information and on measuring this mastery through testing. Preschool education was considered a necessary prerequisite for beginning reading, writing, and mathematics in the first grade. But, as can be seen from the following description, these curriculum materials also produced serious problems. Specifically, these problems centered around five characteristics of the materials and their implementation:

1. Learning in its narrowest sense is required. Teachers, parents, and children have to assume duties and follow the standard program as they do at the elementary school level.
2. Learning materials are not easily adapted to playihg, yet playing is the characteristic way in which children of preschool age learn.
3. Achievement is stressed, thus endangering the harmonious development of the child's whole personality.
4. The cognitive domain of the personality receives absolute priority over the social-emotional and interactive domains, and this emphasis jeopardizes the child's motivation.
5. There is virtually no transfer of functions, capabilities, and skills from the teaching situation to the real-life situations where they are needed (see Oertel, 1976).

Before this phase came to an end, and especially since many different school and kindergarten settings were included, difficulties with this approach were discussed at large. Even where highly structured lessons, homogeneous groupings, priority to the cognitive domain, training and learning as a duty for the whole group, etc. were incorporated within an institution, it was not easy to use function-oriented materials. Teachers and administrators encountered many difficulties that could be solved only by using authority.

Phase 2--Curriculum implementation: Prevalence of the situation-oriented approach. In the second half of the 1970s, the results of work with models in the different Länder were exchanged and tested in a nation-wide trial program (Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung und Forschungsföderung, 1982). This program, a unique experience in West

German educational politics, including about 15,000 children, was charged with finding methods that could be widely used and transferred to everyday kindergarten work. The exclusive concentration of this program on kindergarten work, combined with a diminishing interest in sending 5-year-olds to school, made it apparent that the function-oriented materials widely included in the federal trial program had no chance within the enlarged kindergarten model group. Specifically, kindergarten teachers, for the sake of their children, refused to "function" (i.e., to follow prescriptions day after day, to imitate school settings, to separate children from each other, and to assign duties to children of this age). Although function-oriented instruction was found to enhance test results at the beginning of the child's school life, its effects proved not to last very long. In addition, the overall activities of kindergarten teachers with their children seemed to be of much more importance than the training in files. And finally, a new approach being widely discussed had brought out materials that strengthened social learning processes in the natural surroundings of the child.

In contrast to the large quantity of function-oriented materials developed previously, alternative project materials, although scarcely represented, won increasing acceptance. As has been briefly sketched in the introduction, these situation-oriented materials do not concentrate on teaching basic skills or functions. Instead, they draw on real-life situations and enrich children through multifaceted educational techniques (such as stories, pictures, role playing, games, discussion, etc.). The teacher may choose whatever is appropriate to the group situation, the children's interests, his or her own educational skills, the financial means of the institution, and so forth. The educational proposals are regarded as

enriching the child's life experiences (and probably those of the parents as well), ability to manage real-life situations, chance to solve problems adequately, and inclination to interact socially. Real-life situations (for example, how to use the television, how to deal with quarreling among friends, or how to begin first grade) are an important part of this process. Social learning is central to such materials, and while the results of such learning cannot be measured easily, in the long run children profit personally in terms of their self-concept and social adjustment. Self-confidence, social competence, and mastery of facts are concurrently developed. Kindergarten work in heterogeneous groupings profits from this approach, and in fact more and more kindergartens in the federal trial program rediscovered the logic of a family-like grouping of children (Almstedt & Kammhöfer, 1980).

On the whole, then, the implementation phase inadvertantly promoted the situation-oriented approach and its materials all over the country. Articles in handbooks described the new kindergarten as a situation-oriented institution (Mörsberger, Moskal, & Pflug, 1978).

Phase 3--Curriculum evaluation: Acceptance of the situation-oriented approach. During the last few years, those materials that had been successfully tried out on a federal basis were revised and implemented nationally within the projects of the different Länder. Because only situation-oriented materials had won wide acceptance, only those materials were given a chance for revision. Three schools especially received general recognition; these schools have produced materials now ready for use throughout the 1980s. First of these schools is the situation approach, characterized by 28 teaching units developed under the direction of Jürgen Zimmer (1973) by a working group in preschool education at the German

Youth Institute in Munich. Second is the situative approach, described by Erna Moskal and her working group at the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Order in Düsseldorf in a set of guidelines for the planning process in kindergarten work (Minister für Arbeit, Gesundheit und Soziales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1983). Finally, the situation-oriented approach, developed by the present author and his colleagues at the University of Hannover (Oertel, 1982, 1983), provides eight teaching units. Although the materials produced by these groups vary, sometimes fundamentally, all three schools emphasize the child's social learning and make use of real-life situations in their curricula. Table 1 details the major works and goals of these three approaches; a subsequent section of this discussion will be devoted to an in-depth study of the materials presented by these schools.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Present State

The end of the evaluation phase has brought the reform movement to an end. Apart from research work carried out on specific questions (for example, that concerning handicapped children or children of foreign workers), the research concentrated on curriculum work has stopped completely. While the new approach seems to be widely accepted, it is not firmly established. The present economic crisis makes it more difficult to realize the approach. Kindergarten personnel are reduced, more children are taken into groups, paid time for the planning of educational activities is limited, and virtually no funds are available for the necessary inservice training of kindergarten teachers. Higher professional standards for

kindergarten teachers are seen as being controversial. And, finally, as the crisis goes on, special interest groups are raising criticisms.

THE SITUATION-ORIENTED APPROACH

General Aspects of the Situation-oriented Approach

Although the situation-oriented approach includes different schools (whose specific characteristics, scientific backgrounds, implications for curriculum development, and kindergarten institutions are explained in Table 1 and will be dealt with at greater length shortly), these schools have certain common characteristics. Among these characteristics are the following assumptions:

1. Learning is a matter of experience, especially in early childhood (cf. the "learning by doing" approach of John Dewey). The kindergarten should therefore be seen and structured primarily as a field of experiences for building a way of life through projects, activities, field trips, etc.
2. Growth can best be achieved through everyday life situations involving habits, conflicts in interactions, and fundamental childhood problems. Exercises isolated from real life are ineffectual.
3. Learning in real-life situations means including the whole personality of the child and a wholistic striving for self-confidence, social competence, and mastery of facts (Roth, 1971). The child has to learn to handle situations more and more independently.
4. Intense participatory observation of the everyday life of the child and his or her other activities in the group is essential if the teacher wants to use the situation-oriented approach.

5. Situation-oriented work depends on constant communication within the teaching team. Innovative experiences depend on cooperation.
6. Everyday life in a kindergarten is not made up of a series of isolated activities. Instead, it is a total experience in which each activity is carefully planned to contribute to the overall goal of making the child able to act adequately in life situations. However, the situation-oriented approach requires flexibility on the part of the teacher to meet the needs and interests of the individual children involved.
7. Playing and learning can be regarded as intertwined rather than separated; the multifaceted situations of role playing and role interpreting stimulate identity formation in the child (Mead, 1968).
8. Free play and instruction are equally important opportunities for learning by experience. Experiences with themselves, other children, and adults, as well as with their natural and cultural surroundings, may help children learn to handle their own situations.
9. A flexible response to the specific needs and interests of children is necessarily included in educational planning. Individual participation is never mandatory.
10. Social education (about forms of social contacts, conflicts in the group, and social structures, especially in the immediate environment) is central to the situation-oriented approach; all work can be integrated into this general field (Oertel, 1977-a, 1977-b).

11. Mixed-age groups in kindergartens facilitate social experiences. As compared with children in homogeneous groups, children in heterogeneous groups can meet with friends of different stages of development; they can learn (and are stimulated to do so by the situation itself) how strongly people vary because the variety is greater; they can help and care for one another; and, finally, they can participate in the program as they feel comfortable. No child is forced to meet a standard set for his or her age group because standards, if they exist, are not made explicit.
12. A flexible arrangement of room structures and surroundings can enhance the opportunities of the children to provide their own experiences. In principle, every field of children's activities can be represented within the classroom.
13. Equipment, toys, books, etc., should always be selected according to the general theme of activities, perhaps in cooperation with parents and children. Such themes may be "The Group Life," "Exploring the Surroundings," "Children of Foreign Workers," "Children Come to School," and so forth.
14. Instead of a fixed schedule (weekly, monthly, or yearly), an open plan clearly oriented to the needs and interests of individual children is preferable.
15. Finally, the teacher is not the all-knowing expert but a partner of children and parents, ready to benefit from their knowledge, their ideas, and their abilities to open up opportunities for learning by experiences and to insure learning.

The situation-oriented approach cannot be planned only on a day-to-day basis. It is a continuing process that starts as an idea but slowly

comes to include all facets of the learning process. Step by step, through action and reflection, the whole educational institution undergoes an innovative process. This process can be explained in greater detail according to the different schools of the approach.

Schools of the Situation-oriented Approach

The situation approach: Starting with the social sciences. The situation approach (see Table 1, first column), initiated by Jürgen Zimmer, is an original curriculum development approach that, in comparison with the other two schools, puts the greatest emphasis on the social sciences. Consulting with kindergarten teachers, social science researchers have chosen and analyzed children's present- and future-life situations and have presented their analyses to teachers. The teachers have then continued the developmental process by transforming the analyses into teaching units, giving parents and children equal chances to contribute to the teaching/learning processes. In particular, parents and their children are encouraged to contribute to the choice of analyses and activities, to help make decisions about educational aims, and to assist in determining the concrete parts of the group work referring to life situations. Through these different projects, specific parts of the social reality (such as playgrounds, hospitals, and schools) are presumably influenced in order to meet children's needs and to facilitate their efforts in dealing adequately with these situations. The underlying idea is to open the kindergarten to the community and to democratize the community through kindergarten initiatives. Teaching units may last several months; sometimes several units are dealt with at the same time.

In the beginning, the situation approach was directed primarily toward the content of the teaching process and the teaching/learning

relationship per se. However, during the federal trial program, it became clear that the working conditions in the kindergarten strongly affected the implementation process. The model projects utilizing this approach had excellent working conditions (i.e., two adults in a group of children, time for educational planning, extra rooms to subdivide groups, educational equipment, etc.). Adherents of this approach therefore fight for better working conditions for all kindergartens, asserting that improved conditions will provide better chances to realize the curriculum. Thus, this approach can also be considered the most politicized of the three.

The situative approach: Starting with the socialization process. The situative approach (see Table 1, second column), represented by Erna Moskal and her colleagues, started from very traditional kindergarten background and educational planning and has tried to inject innovation into them. According to this approach, the kindergarten teacher works within the everyday situations in the early childhood group (how the children play and what they talk about and look at) and tries to enlarge on these activities. A curriculum, if considered a book of preplanned activities, is not necessary. Every teacher has to find his or her own way.

Sometimes this approach is strikingly similar to traditional kindergarten work, but the fine examples published in literature (Merker, Rüsing, & Blanke, 1980) demonstrate that innovation is possible. These examples lean heavily on the play activities of the children. Situations from outside in the community seem to be integrated into play centering on stores, banks, families, teachers, materials, etc. Thus, the community can be considered to be represented, but no special changes, either in the community or in the kindergarten's working conditions or type of educational planning, are expected.

The federal trial program has shown that kindergarten teachers really need a curriculum if they want to function effectively. Without special inservice training, guidelines are not enough. Although guidelines made it easy to get started in the process of implementing the situative approach, they were soon left behind in order to act and reflect on more demanding programs.

The situation-oriented approach: Integrating socialization, situation, and social sciences. The situation-oriented approach (see Table 1, third column) developed by Frithjof Oertel and his colleagues at the University of Hannover started as a mutual exchange between some scientists and many kindergarten teachers. Originally, the teachers were unable to fulfill the demands of social and educational scientists and were dissatisfied with the scientists' work. Slowly, from visit to visit, from observation to observation, from one bit of unit to the next, a mutual understanding between teachers and scientists was developed. This understanding led to a curriculum out of which the scientists developed frames of reference (the understanding of social education, the theory/practice module for curriculum development, and the integration of curriculum work as a part of the overall kindergarten concept). The teaching units per se were the results of the teachers' exchange processes, action, and reflection. The curriculum was designed to give equal attention to the child, the theme (situation), and the discipline. Every effort was made to ascertain the proper balance.

The federal trial program demonstrated the usefulness of this integrative position. Materials could be revised to reflect a greater openness to the situation and flexibility for the learner. The curriculum, the development of which is considered only one part of the activity of the teacher,

will not be undermined if other aspects of the kindergarten do not change. Although this approach begins with traditional work and with the everyday situations that can be observed in the group, innovation within the whole setting is the final goal. The community cannot be completely excluded from these changes.

Criticisms of the Situation-oriented Approach

Although widely used and accepted, situation-oriented approaches have encountered severe criticism from the very beginning, and the criticism has increased in the last few years. Some of this criticism has come from the researchers who introduced these approaches. Some of the questions raised by such researchers are enumerated below:

1. What is meant by the term "situation?"
2. Can the situation chosen be fundamentally, not only pragmatically, justified?
3. How far-reaching should the analysis of the situation be?
4. To what degree is it really possible to allow parents and children to participate in the process of analyzing situations and implementing situational learning?
5. Are all interpretations of situations (for example, "Playgrounds in the Neighborhood") acceptable? If not, how can the inappropriate ones be recognized?
6. After a careful analysis of the situation, what should be included in the teaching process?
7. Can education adequately answer to all the different levels of socialization that can be found in a group of children?
8. How can generally accepted overall goals be managed to keep the full support of the group?

9. To what extent can education really be combined with the play of children?

10. What are the measurable effects of the approach on children's development?

Although the questions have been formulated, research to date has discovered only some of the answers, and the funding of research in this field has come almost to an end.

Other fundamental criticism comes from outside the research community involved with the situation-oriented approach. These major points have been collected, reorganized, and annotated (Höltershinken, 1982). The criticisms are worthy of consideration and will be answered point by point.

Religious arguments. Fundamental criticisms come from religious educators (Kaufmann, 1974) who find the situation-oriented approach anthropologically unsound, especially when implemented according to the situation approach. These critics assert that the overall goals of autonomy and emancipation underlying the situation-oriented approach should be revised. However, they are not sufficiently including the social responsibility of every individual in a given society, and, in fact, a revision of these goals has been accomplished by the authors' addition of "solidarity" to the overall goals. The basic human activity of managing one's situation, the argument goes, is overstressed to the exclusion of culture, tradition, history, and the value-bound behavior that is influenced by these factors (see Colberg-Schrader & Krug, 1980). In other words, the human being is not seen by these critics as being as "free" as the situation-oriented approach implies.

Regardless of their derivation, the overall goals of situation-oriented approaches and their emphasis on socialization can be justified when seen from a broader perspective. Learning is fundamentally social learning; it is a continuing dialogue and an interactive process. It makes sense, therefore, to start formal education with a strategy that first approaches the socializing process at home and tackles real-life situations--their analyses, enrichment, and changes. Descriptions of this process include labels like "autonomy," "self-, social, and factual competence," "self-reliance," and so on. It is the social dimension as a general learning field that is of concern. This definition of learning has nothing to do with actionism, social technology, lack of tradition and history, or avoidance of value questions. There may be dangers in these trends, but these reproaches stem from different interpretations of learning in general.

Arguments from social critics. Arguments next come from scientists who are very critical of our present society. They point out that the approach has not developed a theory of society. Asserting that real-life situations shouldn't be taken as final states that one can choose voluntarily in order to manage, these critics argue that real life situations have to be changed through actions according to a developed concrete utopia. Changing one's individual life situation, step by step, doesn't satisfy these critics. They fear that these efforts will simply stagnate society at its present level (Geulen, 1975).

If critics point out a lack of a utopian model of society implicit in the approach, they must remember that they have a right to give their views, but they must not force their own solutions on all people. Human beings should not be expected to accept only one perspective. The interpretation and definition of situations and their results require long term discus-

sions within every learning group. Otherwise, teachers, students, and parents would be subject to foreign will and would never become self-defining human beings. Defining processes cannot be predetermined for all times and environments; they must be experienced and developed cooperatively. The situation-oriented approach is a process approach emphasizing methodology and not content. It is, therefore, open to everyone's interpretation.

Criticisms based on developmental psychology. Other critics (Göckeler, 1981) stress a lack of orientation toward developmental psychology. They claim that the participation of 3- to 6-year-old children, along with their parents, in the analysis of situations is psychologically unsound, arguing that children cannot be equal to adults in analyzing situations. Children, these critics claim, have different views of reality; it is possible that they would define real-life situations in ways radically different from the interpretations of adults. However, in kindergarten programs utilizing the situation-oriented approach, the role of children involved in analyzing and developing the situation differs dramatically from the role of adults. In their own way, within their level of understanding, children can participate. Admittedly, it is difficult to make socialization processes and educational proposals compatible, as even the authors of these approaches agree, but it is worth the effort (see Zimmer, 1973, p. 43). Developmental theories and empirical data have also shown that, although psychologists have been minimally involved in creating the situation-oriented approach, this method does not demand achievement beyond the ability of the 3- to 6-year-old child. Certainly, participation requires interactive capacities leading to the phase of concrete operations. The development of materials for preschool learning tasks is central to this

approach. However, a simple adherence to Piaget's approach is inadequate because egocentrism and social learning seem to be mutually exclusive at this age. The development of the learning processes of preschool children has to be fundamentally refined.

Arguments concerning Neo-Marxian influence. Finally, some critics actually fear a Neo-Marxian influence on kindergarten work resulting from the situation-oriented approach (Maier, 1980). This almost irrational criticism has to do with the orientation of the approach toward Piaget's findings that children develop their moral judgments in different stages. To these critics, this means a refusal of classical ethical thinking within the churches, especially within the Catholic church. Criticisms also concern the critical theory of Habermas, in which ethical positions cannot be simply stated by authority (religion, church, or party) but must be developed through human communication.

To refute these claims, it can be argued that the ethical norms of any religious denomination or social group are not lost when children are involved in the development of their own system of values. Condemning this as a Neo-Marxian approach is absurd. For the children's sake, the perspective of special interest groups must be rejected. Such views may be presented, but, because the structure of thinking, speaking, and acting is not merely an adapting process, they will not be accepted.

While space does not allow for a specific answer to all of the criticisms of the situation-oriented approach, it may be noted that they are to some extent self-contradictory. In addition, these arguments are bound to specific disciplines and interests, and in many cases ask too much of the theoretical background and practical realization of the approach. An educational approach can never solve all problems and be acceptable to all

interest groups. However, these criticisms include the main points of the present discussion of preschool education in West Germany and point out some of the inherent dangers.

The next section will deal fundamentally with the scientific background that supports the situation-oriented approach. This background will make clear that the approach is essential for competence formation and identity development during the child's preschool years. Social learning is the fundamental agent of change in the child's early development. If this point can be illuminated, even the most profound scepticism about situation-oriented curricula should disappear.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE PRIORITY OF SOCIAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

First argument: Changes in curriculum development and research (i.e., in applied research) are reactions to worldwide trends in basic research. The shift toward situation-oriented curricula from function-oriented (also called "discipline-oriented") curricula has been described in didactic literature as a shift toward (a) process versus product orientation, (b) interactionistic versus behavioristic learning, (c) teachers and learners being treated as subjects rather than objects, (d) curriculum development by teachers themselves rather than by experts, (e) decentralized versus centralized decision making, (f) context-bound curriculum as opposed to curriculum materials neutral to contexts, and (g) task orientation rather than knowledge orientation (Becker & Haller, 1974; Deutscher Bildungsrat, Bildungskommission, 1974; "Thema: Offene Curricula," 1973).

Those in West Germany and elsewhere who choose situation-oriented curricula (which became more and more the majority position in Germany) also choose a change in the models of basic research. They have rejected

positivistic or behavioristic positions in favor of relativistic, phenomenological positions: Humans cannot be seen as complex machines that can be conditioned under scientific control to the right behavior for the improvement of humankind. On the contrary, individuals must be seen as active beings defining themselves in a continuing interaction with their surroundings, through experiences that force them to organize, differentiate, and restructure perceptions again and again but bring them to no more than relative truth in the process (Breadmore, 1980). The situation-oriented approach has to be seen in the light of a tradition that stresses social learning, interaction, and communication as basic to learning processes.

Second argument: Recent efforts to describe the development of the child tend to emphasize the mutual exchange of biological and societal factors in development, describing not only their existence but also their intertwined effects at every step of development as well (Peukert, 1979). Whenever scientists in West Germany today try to describe the development of the child or even aspects of the child's behavior--for example, playing (Hebenstreit, 1979)--they draw from theories of different origins in order to avoid a one-sided picture. Mostly, elements of cognitivism (Piaget, Bruner) are combined with those of psychoanalysis (Freud, Erikson) and symbolic interactionism (Mead, Goffman, Krappmann). Parmentier (1979) shows us some biological tendencies in Freud and Piaget. He explains that two extreme positions of learning are no longer acceptable: learning as a process of actualizing a genetic potential (as in maturation theory) and learning as a result of influences from outside (as in behavioristic learning theory). To Parmentier, learning is a defining process based on symbolic interactionism:

> Each definition of a situation which a human being makes is based on his desire to perceive the situation as it really is. But the reality of the situation is unknown. You can never grasp a situation in itself--except from its definition through the thinking and acting human being. Whether there are situations independent of "defining" processes of the human being can never be known by this human being. . . . Defining situations, therefore, can never be an act of reflection, like looking into a mirror. But at the same time it cannot be a simple projection either. In both cases the activity of the human being would be limited to the continual repetition of what already exists, be it within the subject or in the environment. Instead, I am considering the definition of a situation as an undertaking in which subjective and objective moments of reality are intertwined. The situation thus defined is the expression of reality reworked by the human being. (pp. 26-27)

Learning in itself is therefore an interactive process; in its fundamentals, it is situation-oriented social learning.

Third argument: A critical analysis of theories and empirical data concerning the development of competence and identity formation in early childhood shows that the development of interactive competencies must have priority over cognitive and verbal competencies. In order to clarify the process of identity formation in children, a brief description of development in the cognitive, language, and interactive domains follows. With respect to the cognitive domain, Piaget (1967), and Bruner (1970) describe the cognitive capacities in early childhood as preoperational and rigid with respect to context and situation. But the

cognitive structure of young children can be changed, as has been demonstrated especially by Russian psychologists (Galperin, 1969; Leontjew, 1973; Wygotski, 1974). Children can partially use abstract thinking, and special studies prove that egocentric speech has the sense of dialogue rather than monólogue. Such speech can be seen functioning positively as cognitive self-direction in problematic situations:

> This means that thinking and control behavior have to be considered with Wygotski as an internalization of language and of the control behavior of the language community of the child; egocentric speech is typical of the transitional stage from external speech to internal thought. (Peukert, 1979, p. 99).

Speech development accordingly precedes cognitive development..

As concerns the language domain, the acquisition of language cannot be explained acceptably as a simple conditioning process (cf.. the disagreement between B. F. Skinner and Noam Chomsky at the end of the 1950s). Although the role of biological or genetic determinants should not be discounted, language development is seen today as the learning of complex action sequences that increasingly find verbal expression. Language cannot be considered a system of symbols with which an objective reality can be copied; instead, it represents a "way of life," a "practice through use" (Wittgenstein, 1967). Consequently, verbal acts have to be seen as actions in situations having consequences. New research approaches demonstrating this understanding show that the child, from his or her earliest attempts at speaking, tries to structure interaction. For the child, every verbal act has meaning depending on cognitive knowledge. Through problems of interaction with responding persons, the child is forced to give up naive routines of interaction and to develop syntactical

differentiation (Miller, 1976). In the child between the ages of 3 and 6 years, verbal behavior becomes more and more independent of its context, paralleling the development of the child's interactive capacities and his or her insight into different perspectives on situations.

In the interactive domain, research into the development of interactive competencies in early childhood clearly demonstrates that the hypothesis of egocentrism in early childhood must be revised. Role taking does not require concrete operational thinking. Although much empirical data explains that the preschool child is unable to clearly distinguish between his or her own perspective and the perspectives of others, this result should be interpreted very carefully. A revised model of social competence, according to Flavell (1974), shows that elementary knowledge of different perspectives in visual and affective perception and experiencing exists at a very early age. An individual has to consider the perspective of others in order to fulfill personal intentions. However, role-taking abilities are used to different degrees according to the difficulty of a task (i.e., a person may have the competencies but may not necessarily use them). It is difficult for preschool children to anticipate and heed the emotions and perspectives of other children as clearly as they perceive their own. An adult can interpret a child's behavior adequately only by seeing the situation through the child's eyes. Children need to be taught to actualize and develop further their capacities for changing their perspectives. Interactive experiences thus have an effect on both speech and thinking.

Fourth argument: An analysis of basic research in early childhood demonstrates that social learning deserves preeminence in early childhood education (Peukert, 1979). The fundamental areas in early childhood

development, as defined in this literature, include (a) shifting from egocentrism to sociocentrism, (b) assuring one's role in appropriate age and sex groups, and (c) learning empathy (i.e., reflecting on one's own role in relation to others). These steps are all overall goals of social learning. The process of development from a preoperational to a concrete operational stage in thinking, speaking, and interacting "can be seen as a process in which interactive potentials lead to a differentiation of syntactical structure and a clearer verbal description of complex situations. In the cognitive domain this potential helps the transition to reversible operations (Piaget) . . . and to a continuing decentralization of perspectives of perception" (Peukert, 1979, p. 167). The situation-oriented approach can certainly aid in this process.

Fifth argument: The structure of interactive processes in early childhood must be set up in accordance with the overall goals of social learning. Such social learning must be seen as occurring within a situation-oriented context:

1. The development of the child must be seen as an interactive process in which the reactions of the child are affected by the actions he or she has learned to expect from adults and the actions of adults are shaped by the reactions they expect from the child.
2. The whole personality of the child, in all its dimensions, must be included.
3. Different stages of development (for which the cognitive theory of Piaget, if modified, is still the best frame of reference) must be taken into account by the teacher.

4. Learning must be interpreted as a dialectical process that necessitates continual restructuring of the thinking process in the attempt to cope with problems. Educational processes and programs must be shaped in order to envision the child today in terms of his or her potential for the future.

CONGLUSION

Preschool education in West Germany can be seen in terms of several perspectives resulting from various aspects of the reform movement during the last 15 years. The present situation of the kindergarten, which serves 3- to 6-year-old children, can be best demonstrated in the development, implementation, and evaluation of its programs. Three stages of development have been described, and today's predominant situation-oriented approach has been characterized and illustrated through description of its different schools.

This approach and its instructional materials have legitimized preschool education as an academic field and given it an educational perspective in its own right. One hopes that this bodes well for preschool education in the 1980s. Criticism of the approach, mostly the result of the economic crisis and political conservatism, cannot stand up to research findings. The basic principles of the situation-oriented approach have been justified scientifically. After years of applied research--development, implementation, evaluation, and revision of educational concepts and materials--the approach is now ready for worldwide use. Its materials are appropriate for preschool institutions in any country with an industrialized society similar to West Germany's. In theory and practice, its methodology may be used for curriculum development throughout the world.

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FOOTNOTE

[1]The term "situation-oriented approach" is used in this discussion in two ways. It refers generally to all varieties of the approach, but--if so noted--also indicates specifically the curriculum devised by Oertel and colleagues.

Table 1

Schools of the Situation-oriented Approach

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
1. Author and developmental group	Jürgen Zimmer and the Working Group in Preschool Education of the German Youth Institute at Munich, composed for several years of about 30 experts in the field and kindergarten teachers and social educators of Hesse and Rhineland-Pfalz.	Erna Moskal, in connection with a mixed working group of the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Order at Dusseldorf in Nordrhein-Westfalia	Frithjof Oertel and his co-workers W. Dichans, S. Böse, R.-Chr. Bracke, R. Bührlen-Enderle, M. Dedekind, H. L. Fichtner, A. Gerke, and W. Liekefett, in cooperation with kindergarten teachers and social educators of Lower Saxony--a project carried through at the University of Hannover.
2. Title of materials	Curriculum Soziales Lernen. Didaktische Einheiten für	Arbeitshilfen zur Planung der Arbeit im Kinder-	Elementare Sozialerziehung: Praxishilfen für den Kin-

Type of Approach,	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
	den Kindergarten [Social Learning Curriculum. Teaching Units for Early Childhood Education]. (Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung, 1980).	garten [Aids for the Planning of Kindergarten Work]. (Minister für Arbeit, Gesundheit und Soziales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1983).	dergarten [Elementary Social Education: Practical Aids for Kindergarten Work] (Oertel, 1982). Konzept und Methoden elementarer Sozialerziehung: Materialien für die Aus- und Fortbildung der Erzieher [Concept and Methods of Elementary Social Education: Materials for the Training of Kindergarten Teachers] (Oertel, 1983).

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
3. Main content	28 units dealing with subjects such as television, handicapped children, children of foreign workers, children in the hospital, etc. Units are subdivided into introduction, materials to analyze the situation, educational proposals, cooperation of parents and other adults, and use of didactic materials.	8 chapters and 3 appendices. Chapters include "Kindergarten as an Institution in Its Own Right," "Planning and Evaluation of Educational Work," "Methods and Organizational Structures of Educational Work," "Tasks and Forms of Work with Parents," "Teamwork," "Materials for Kindergarten Work," "Children in Specific Situations," and "Coop-	8 units, including "Entering Kindergarten," "We Get to Know Each Other," "The Kindergarten Group," "Everybody Has a Family," "Exploring Our Surroundings," "What We Do Outside of Kindergarten Time," "People Here and in Other Places," and "We'll Go to First Grade." Units include general aids for planning, proposals for practical work, and hints on other materials (pic-

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
		eration with the Primary School and Other Educational Institutions." Appendices include "Fundamental Perspectives in Education," "Prescriptions of the Law," and "Contributions of the Institute of Social Education."	ture books, stories, play materials, handbooks for kindergarten teachers, etc.).
4. Important accompanying literature and other relevant materials	17 situation films to accompany different teaching units. Also Zimmer (1973), Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung (1973-1976), and	Merker, Rüsing, and Blanke (1980).	Film on conflict education at the preschool level (brochure, 2 x 2 slides, and cassette). Also Küchenhoff and Oertel

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
	Colberg-Schrader and Krug (1977, 1980).		(1976), Oertel (1978).
5. Target group	Primarily kindergartens and training institutes.	Primarily all kindergartens and training institutes in Nordrhein-Westfalia	Primarily the individual kindergarten teacher and social educators, personnel of training institutes, and preschool experts.
6. Educational aims and overall goals for the child	Autonomy and competence (solidarity), capacity to manage life situations in social contexts.	Self-confidence, communication skills, discovery and understanding of one's surroundings, articulation and management of changing life situations.	Self-competence, social competence, and factual competence (a competence set); development of forms of social contact; resolution of conflicts; understanding of societal structures in

Table 1, p. 6

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
			everyday life, management of conflicts and life situations.
7. Methodological approach	"Projects" (field trips, activities, group reports, and documentaries) and "plays" (mostly role playing or simulation games) accompanied, prepared, or evaluated by discussion. Planning processes with children and parents, opening of kindergarten work to the community.	Development of play and "free activities," work in differing small groups, introduction of play and work materials, flexible use of time and space, mixture of direct and indirect methods.	Themes developed by playing, telling stories, showing pictures, preparing collages. From time to time, excursions and smaller activities. Treatment by discussion, repeated playing, and creative work; introduction of themes into periods of free play.

Table 1, p. 7

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
8. Process of planning	Choice and analysis of present and future real-life situations by researchers and others involved; continued analysis of situations, resulting in immediate changes. Linkage between social learning and technical skills within this process; cooperation among parents in defining goals, analyzing situations, and organizing the child's learning processes. Mutual learning of parents.	Observation and its structuring, defining themes, developing themes according to learning fields.	Choice of situation among the teaching group (observation and collection of information), analysis of the situation (documentation and judgment), decisions about relevant aims, methodological orientation, and evaluation following implementation.

Table 1, p. 8

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
	teachers, and children for close contact between kindergarten and community.		
9. Project history	1971-75: Development of materials in Hesse and Rhineland-Pfalz. 1976-78/79: Federal trial program, including the 9 participating Länder. Formation of special evaluation group for the program. 1979-80: Revision.	1974: Publication of materials. 1976-78/79: Federal trial program in 8 Länder. Specific evaluation of materials by an internal evaluation group. Revision for use in the 1980s.	1970-71: Prepatory stage 1972-75: Development of materials in Lower Saxony. 1976-78/79: Federal trial program in 7 Länder. Specific evaluation in Lower Saxony. 1980-81: Revision.

Table 1, p. 9

Type of Approach	Situation Approach	Situative Approach	Situation-oriented Approach
10. Scientific background	Robinsohn, Dewey, Illich, and Freire. Reaction against function- and "discipline-" oriented approaches and traditional kindergarten work.	Reaction against function-oriented approaches, subject orientation, content orientation, but also against too much action in the classroom.	Roth, Hentig, and the new social studies in the United States. Reaction against systematic learning in preschool education and traditional social education.