DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 463   PS 016 089

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TITLE   Implications of Recent Research for the Preschool and
                Kindergarten Curriculum.
PUB DATE   86
NOTE   14p.; Document contains light, dot matrix print.
PUB TYPE   Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Academic Achievement; Emotional Development;
                *Individual Development; Interpersonal Competence;
                *Kindergarten; Language Acquisition; *Preschool
                Curriculum; Preschool Education; Student Interests;
                *Student Projects; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS   Research Results

ABSTRACT
                Summarized are implications of recent research on
children's development and learning for the curriculum in early
childhood programs. Contents focus on the development of language,
dispositions, social competence, and intellect. Taken together, the
research suggests that children attending preschool and kindergarten
classes should frequently be provided with opportunities for
involvement in projects. A project is defined as a group undertaking,
usually concerning a specific theme or topic, which requires various
kinds of work over a period of several days or weeks. Concluding
remarks identify three basic kinds of projects and three phases of
project work. A three-page list of references concludes the document.
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IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT RESEARCH FOR THE PRESCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM

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SYNOPSIS

Implications of recent research on children's development and learning for the curriculum in early childhood programs are summarized as follows:-

1. Intellectual Development

a. Young children's learning is maximimized when they are engaged in interactive processes (cf. Brown and Campione, 1984; Glaser, 1984; Karmiloff-Smith, 1984; Rogoff, 1982;) and when they are engaged in active rather than passive activities.

b. Young children need opportunities to apply the skills they are learning, and therefore preschool and kindergarten activities which provide contexts for applying skills are required.

c. It is useful to think of four categories of learning, perhaps in all education, but certainly for young

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children: Knowledge, skills, feelings and dispositions. The latter category is usually omitted. Dispostions are difficult to define, but for present purposes we think of them as tendencies to respond to experience in certain ways (i.e. curiosity, resourcefulness, or their opposites, etc) or as 'habits of mind' rather than mindless habits. If desirable dispositions are to be strengthened, children must have opportunities to manifest them and these manifestations must be appreciated and acknowledged. Children also need activities that are likely to strengthen their dispositions to use the skills (Katz, 1985) the skills they are learning.

d. Introduction to academic work too soon and too insistently may undermine children's dispositions to use the skills thus acquired (Katz, 1985). It is possible to teach academic skills to very young children, but it is also possible to damage their dispositions to use them in the process. Thus young children can certainly be instructed successfully in phonics and can acquire beginning reading skills; they risk of requiring these achievements too early is that in the process of instruction, drill and practice, their dispositions to become readers will be undermined. The challenge for educators is to help with

both the acquisition of skills and the strengthening of
desirable dispositions - both together.

e. When the same or single teaching method is used for a
group of young children, a significant proportion of
them is likely to fail. The use of a single method or
the application of a homogeneous treatment to a group
of children of diverse backgrounds and developmental
stages must result in heterogeneous outcomes; for those
outcomes we wish to be homogeneous (e.g. mastery of
basic skills, the acquisition of social competence,
optimum self confidence, the disposition to pursue
interests, etc.) heterogeneous treatments are required.

f. The younger children are, the greater should be the
variety of teaching methods used (Durkin, 1980; see
also Nelson & Seidman, 1984).

g. Academic work should not be confused with intellectual
development. For young children, the latter typically
includes decontextualized tasks unrelated to children's
experiences or interests. The term 'time on task', in
the case of young children, too often means 'time on
deadly task'! Such tasks weaken children's dispositions
to apply themselves to potentially interesting and
valuable learning activities and threatens their
intellectual development. Intellectual development has

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to do with the life of the mind in its fullest sense. It includes dispositions (i.e. habits of mind, not mindless habits). characteristic ways of thinking, observing and examining one's environment and experiences, and the capacity for sustained involvement in learning projects in which topics are explored in depth and followed up in new directions and elaborated over a period of time – days or weeks.

2. Language Development

Contemporary insights into the development of communicative competence in young children also indicates that:

a. All three basic functions of language (communication, expression and reasoning) are strengthened when children are engaged in conversation rather than when they are simply exposed passively to language;

b. Conversation is most likely to occur when children are in small groups of three or four, with or without an adult present;

c. Conversation is most likely when something of interest to the children occurs in context and when children are interacting in small groups about a matter of interest, projected work, making plans, helping one another with

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work, etc., with or without an adult (Bruner, J. 1982; Clark & Wade, 1983; Wells, 1983).

d. Conversation is more likely to be prolonged when adults make comments to the children rather than when they ask them questions (Blank, 1985). Conversation is difficult, if not unlikely during a 'whole group' experience. Especially in the case of prekindergarten and kindergarten children, adults are obliged to spend much time reminding most of the eager waiting children that it is not their turn to speak! Unless the children are discussing some plans, activities, ideas, opinions or common concerns of real interest and import to all in the group, 19 children are wasting their time in such whole group meetings.

3. Development of Dispositions

Of the four categories of goals for education (the acquisition of knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings) the category called dispositions is often overlooked (Katz, 1985). Of special concern to educators is the disposition called interest, defined roughly as the ability to lose oneself or become engrossed in an activity or concern outside of oneself. Contemporary research suggests that

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a. When young children are rewarded for participation in activities they are likely to engage in spontaneously, the reward has an "over-justification effect" resulting in subsequent loss of interest in that activity (Morgan, 1984);

b. While children need positive feedback as they work, not all kinds of positive feedback strengthens the disposition referred to here as interest. General positive feedback (smiling face, gold star, comments like "Very good", etc.) tends to cause the learner to continue producing at various tasks, but without interest (i. e. and to abandon them when the feedback is withheld). However, positive feedback which is contingent, specific and informative with respect to competence of the actual task performance tends to enhance interest. The general non-specific feedback seems to serve as 'an inducement' to continue producing. But the informative feedback appears to act as a tribute and enhances interest in the tasks.

c. The disposition 'interest' can be strengthened when children are encouraged to engage in projects that call for sustained efforts over time and provide contexts for extension, elaboration and continuation of work and play (Rosenfield, Folger, and Adelman, 1980).

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4. Social Competence

a. Contemporary research is also very convincing on the
notion that a child of six years old (give or take a
year) who has not acquired minimal social competence is
very much more likely than others to be a school drop
out (Gottman, 1983; Parker and Asher, 1986) and is at
significant risk in young adulthood in terms of school
drop-out, delinquency, mental health, marital
adjustment, and other aspects of social life in which
interactive competence is required (Asher, Renshaw &
Hymel, 1982).

b. It is useful to think of social competence as having
the characteristics of a <u>recursive cycle</u> such that
whatever competence or incompetence a child has, the
chances are that others react him/her in such a way
that she will get more of it (Katz, in press). Thus a
child who is socially skillful is likely to be accepted
by peers and interaction with peers provides occasions
for strengthening social skills. A child with poor
skills tends to be either ignored, neglected or
rejected by others; in the first two cases the child
will lack occasions to sharpen skills and therefore
become even more.isolated. In the case of the rejected
child, he or she tends to re-enter the situation
exhibiting the same behavior that caused the initial

rejection more intensely and is thus more intensely rejected. Thus the behavior feeds on itself in a recursive cycle (see also Patterson, 1986).

c. Social competence cannot be taught by direct instruction, but is acquired when children have opportunities to interact successfully with peers while engaged in worthwhile activities together. Weaknesses in social competence may be intensified during such interactions unless adults help the child alter maladaptive patterns. A range of techniques that teachers can use to foster the development of social competence is now available (Burton, in press; Katz, 1984).

Conclusion

In addition to the insights drawn from research on specific aspects of development, research on the impacts of different kinds of early childhood curricula support the view that young children should be in preschool and kindergarten programs which provide opportunities for interaction, active rather than passive activities, and in which they have ample opportunity to initiate activities that interest them (Koester & Farley, 1982; Fry & Addington, 1984).The benefits of informal interactive teaching methods are especially

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striking in the long term and notably discouraging in the short term (Miller & Bizzell, 1983; Schweinhart, Weikart & Larner, 1986). According to Walberg (1984) Hedges, Gianconia and Gage (in Walberg, 1984) synthesized 153 studies of open education, including 90 dissertations, and

> ...the average effect was near zero for achievement, locus of control, self concept, and anxiety (which suggests no difference between open and control classes on these criteria); about .2 for adjustment, attitude toward schools and teachers, curiosity, and general mental abil;ity; and about a moderate .3 for cooperativeness, creativity, and independence. Thus students in open classes do no worse in standardized achievement and slight to moderately better on several outcomes that educators, parents and students hold to be of great value Walberg, 1984, p. 25)

Together these insights support the view that a significant proportion of the time children spend in preschool and Kindergarten classes should be allocated to PROJECT WORK.

Characteristics of Projects

A project is a group undertaking, usually around a particular theme or topic. It involves a variety of kinds of work over a period of several days or weeks.

There are three basic kinds of projects, though some are combinations of two or more kinds. The three broad categories of projecs are:

a. Reconstructing aspects of the environment within the preschool or primary school setting.

b. Investigating aspects of the environment and

reporting the results to classmates in various ways.

c. Observing aspects of the environment and preparing ways to present or report the observations to others.

Projects may or may not have a project leader who coordinates the activities of the group involved. On some occasions the membership of the project group may fluctuate; on others it may seem beneficial to require stability of project group membership or to be encouraged to see a task through to completion.

Projects usually have three rough phases that are likely to blend into each other:

a. Planning phase during which children and staff discuss the elements of the project, develop plans and procedures for obtaining the materials, building the elements or carrying out the investig- ations and observations. It would also include discussions about what information to obtain during field trips or site visits.

b. Constructing or building the parts of the project, gathering information, or making observations. Preparing pictures, displays, presentations and other ways of reporting to classmates what has been learned would also be included in this phase.

c. Role playing or taking the roles appropriate to the various elements of the project. Playing with, around or in the project. This period may also include extensions and elaborations on elements of the project.

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