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ABSTRACT

While it has been, and currently is, the practice of early childhood educators to evaluate educational programs in terms of their impact on children's development, enhancing children's knowledge may be as important as enhancing development; it is possible, in fact, that the enhancement of knowledge could be a better goal for early childhood education. Evidence of the long term effects of early childhood programs supports the view that developmental theory is a resource to early childhood curricula, not a source, since indices of developmental impact (IQ gains) fade by about third grade, while impact on school achievement continues through high school. Of course, knowledge of child development can help teachers understand what young children are capable of knowing; how children come to know what they know at a particular developmental stage; and how they validate their knowledge. Curriculum content, however, is derived not only from knowledge of what children are capable of knowing at a particular level, but also from what members of a culture consider important for children to know. Examples of educational practices in the kindergartens of China and Jewish kindergartens in the United States illustrate this point of view. Concluding remarks discuss D. Elkind's recently expressed views on the issues of what to teach young children and how curriculum content should be taught and argue that more efforts are needed to make the content of America's early childhood programs explicit. (RH)

KNOWLEDGE AND THE KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM

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KNOWLEDGE AND THE KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM 1

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To many early childhood education professionals, early childhood education is seen as the practical application of the principles of child development (Caldwell, 1984). This would suggest that early childhood education programs only reflect child development research and theory. This view is embedded in the traditional goals of early childhood education programs that have changed relatively little through the decades. When I started as an early childhood teacher more than three and one half decades back, I was taught that the purpose of early childhood education programs was to foster the social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of children. While our focus since the mid-sixties has given greater emphasis to cognitive development and less to socio-emotional and physical development, we still evaluate our programs in terms of their impact on development. Thus the programs that were developed for low income and minority children in the 1960s were evaluated in terms of their impact on IQ scores, an index of development and long term effects are sought related to the continuing intellectual development of children who have been in these programs. In addition, it is suggested that the worth of current programs be evaluated according to guidelines for <u>developmental appropriateness</u>, with no other concerns being voiced (Bredekamp,

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1986).

Such guidelines relating to developmental appropriateness alone obscure the quest for the answer to the question: "What does the early childhood teacher teach and how well is it taught?" It would seem that what one teaches young children is irrelevant, except to the extent that it nurtures development. Seldom is a program's evaluation based upon children's achievement or learning outcomes, except when that achievement is conceived of as having an impact on development.

I have to question this premise, however, and suggest that enhancing children's knowledge may be equally as important as enhancing their development, and possibly a better goal for early childhood education. There is a significant difference between developmental theory and educational theory. While one can inform the other, one cannot be derived from the other (Fein and Schwartz, 1982). In fact, as I have asserted earlier, developmental theory can be viewed as a resource to early childhood curriculum, but not as a source (Spodek, 1973). As a matter of fact, the evidence that we have on long term effects of early childhood programs would question its impact on developmental processes, while supporting its value for improving educational processes. Thus in the studies of long term effects of early childhood education, IQ gains -- indices of developmental impact -- fade by about third grade, while the impact on school achievement was sustained through the high school.

As we look at early childhood education, we need to separate out the content of education, what we teach, from the process of education, how we teach. The process of educating young children is closely related to their level of development. Knowledge of child development can help us understand what young children are capable of knowing, how children come to know what they know at a particular stage in their development, as well as how they validate their knowledge. But the content of what we want these children to know comes not only from our knowledge of what children are capable of knowing at a particular level, but also of our knowledge of what our culture thinks is important for children to know.

Let me present two illustrations of different school content for children ages 3 through 5. Each of these is significantly different from the traditions we have developed in our field. One grew out of my studies of kindergartens in China; the other from being an external member of a PhD committee at the University of Maryland.

Education in China was significantly influenced by Soviet educational practice at every level in the 1950s and this influence continues. For kindergartens this has meant that the curriculum contains six areas of learning: music, language, mathematics, physical education, art, and general knowledge (a combination of science and social studies). In addition, opportunities for play are provided to children. The six areas of the curriculum are taught through formal lessons. Three- to four-

year-olds have one or two lessons a day of about 15 minutes duration, Four- to five-year-olds have two 20 to 25 minute lessons, and five- to six-year-olds have two to three 25-30 minute lessons each day. (Kindergartens operate on a six day week). The lessons represent a form of direct instruction, with teachers lecturing to children, often using teacher made teaching aids to illustrate the concepts presented and to maintain the children's attention. Children, by the way, remain attentive and well behaved, sitting in their seats around tables, often with their hands behind their backs until the time for participation in the activity arrives (Lu, 1987). The Chinese kindergarten program as it exists today is not conceived of as deriving from developmental theory, but is rooted in the subjects that are taught.

A very different approach to determining the knowledge base of early childhood education has been developed by Feinberg (1986). She has been involved in studying the curriculum choices of Jewish nursery schools and kindergartens. In her study, rather than seek what areas of development these schools wish to enhance in their children, she has looked at what educators want the children to know, searching within traditional Jewish knowledge for the source of an early childhood Jewish curriculum. Thus her areas include Bible Study, The Jewish Way of Life, the Hebrew Language, Israel, Jewish Peoplehood, Faith in God, and Jewish Values and Attitudes. Feinberg's quest is important because these schools serve a special subpopulation in our nations with

traditions and values different from the majority culture's. As a result these early childhood education programs value different learnings that they want children to achieve.

It is obvious that Chinese kindergartens curriculum constructs are different because they come from a different theoretical orientation. But what about the Jewish nursery school? Because these preschools are different from mainstream preschools and serve different purposes, the content must be made explicit. Actually, once can find a parallel content in traditional early childhood program. But it is implicit, and therefore unstudied. Our preschools teach about the American way of life, the English language, America, American peoplehood, and American values and attitudes. The fact that early childhood content is made explicit does not mean that it is developmentally inappropriate, nor is the reverse true. These two are not mutually exclusive. But developmental appropriateness alone is not enough. I have argued that in addition to developmental appropriateness, the values of our culture and the nature of the knowledge we want our children to gain determine the content of our programs (Spodek, 1987).

Elkind (in press) has recently addressed the issue of what to teach in early childhood education. He suggests that early childhood teachers should begin to teach young children the content, the concepts and classification of the different disciplines such as science, social studies and history. Young children should also be taught different colors, shapes and

sizes, learning to match, categorize, discriminate and order things according to the similarities and differences of their attributes. Along with presenting a proposal regarding what to teach in early childhood education, Elkind also addressed the issue of how to teach, suggesting that the most appropriate way of doing this is through projects. This approach to method is similar to the one originally conceived of in the progressive kindergartens of the first quarter of the twentieth century (Weber, 1984).

Elkind's proposal, though less than full blown and lacking a compelling rationale, is consistent with the organization and content of early childhood curriculum proposed by Robison and Spodek (1965) more than two decades ago. It represents, I believe, a rethinking of early childhood educational curriculum, and a focus on what the early childhood educator should consider in designing programs for young children. I believe that we need more efforts to make explicit the content of our early childhood program. Only when that content becomes public can we begin to evaluate it as to its effectiveness, and its worth, as well as its practicality.

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