

Early Schooling ... An Idea Whose Time Has Gone?

By Cheri Fuller

Editor's Introduction

No serious thought can be conducted without assumptions. The problem is that a sound argument supported by good evidence, but based upon a false assumption, can only lead to a faulty conclusion.

By their nature, assumptions are beliefs so taken for granted that it is not deemed necessary to prove them. Experts are not immune to this problem. The intellectuals of their day have believed the sun revolved around the earth, that the world is flat, and that Hitler would guarantee peace in their time.

The universal value of "early childhood education" could be such a false assumption. What the experts seem to have in mind is the schooling of young children by "specialists" trained in techniques beyond the grasp of the average parent. Programs designed for "at-risk" children will be mandated for all children. The multi-faceted learning that takes place naturally in a nurturing family environment is not on the agenda.

"Early childhood education" is an article of faith with many in Task Force 2,000, the education community, legislature, media, business and the general public. Yet, the evidence against it, and institutional day care, is mounting daily. It is hoped that this report will serve to challenge interested citizens and policy-makers to investigate their assumptions before they restructure social policy based upon this seductive and expensive assumption such as:

(a) Peer dependency/Negative socialization

Cornell University's Urie Bronfenbrenner and other researchers have found that children who are with their peers more than their parents in the early years will become peer dependent. To the extent that they conform to their peers, they suffer four crucial losses: (1) self worth, (2) optimism, (3) respect for parents, (4) trust in peers, setting the stage for drugs, sex, alcohol and violence. [6] Stanford's Albert Bandura and others report that peer dependency is now pervasive at the preschool level. [7]

Contrary to common opinion, little children are not best socialized by other children. Their social development is best enhanced by parent example, building confidence in themselves and cooperation with others in a family setting. And in a reasonably warm home, "adult-child responses, which are the master key to education will be 50 to 100 times more than the average teacher-child responses in the classroom." [8]

(b) Damage to parental attachment/Emotional development

The foundation stone of the child's personality is his or her relationship with parents, especially the mother. If the child forms a secure attachment relationship with his parents, he will, according to John Bowlby, well-known British psychiatrist, form a positive internal working model of himself, his world and his parents. (Bowlby was concerned about the parent-child bond especially through age eight.) He will be a cooperative individual as he grows up, possessing high self-esteem. He will be able to trust others. [9] He will have a foundation for school success. Other leading researchers are alarmed at the movement away from mother and the home. Why? Because too early placement of young children in school may place limits on their ability to make full use of their developmental potential by damaging parental attachment.

Psychologist Jay Belsky of Penn State University, a day care researcher for more than ten years, suggests that early day care places the child at risk emotionally, particularly in his social relationships.

One of the most widespread sources of childhood stress is the increasing separation of children from their parents at young ages. "Declining parental attachment is an extremely serious risk to children today. The verdict of enormous psychological literature is that time spent with a parent is the very clearest correlate of healthy child development," says Karl Zinsmeister, Adjunct Research Associate at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. When young children go into extensive non-parental care, he says, many of them will suffer emotional and intellectual harm with symptoms including low self-esteem, increased aggressiveness, weak child-parent bonds, poor social skills and poor academic performance. [10]

In addition, early institutional care increases the risk of acquired infectious diseases [11], attention deficit problems and hyperactivity. [12]

(c) Intellectual development

The availability of appropriate preschool programs may be important for those parents who are unable to provide their children adequate intellectual and social enrichment, or for handicapped or at-risk children. But even those children would best benefit from a morning program combined with an afternoon at home with a caring parent or grandparent. [13]

If a half day of kindergarten is good for kids, a whole day should be better, New York City educators thought. Following this theory, all-day kindergarten classes for the 1983-84 school year were instituted. At the end of the year, the children who had attended all day kindergarten had made greater gains than students in half-day classes. But these gains were short-lived. "Reading and mathematics tests administered at the end of the second grade showed no measurable differences between children with half-day and full-day kindergarten experience," says educator Carolyn H. Jarvis of New York City's Board of Education. She reported her findings at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. [14]

Some educators think that children learn best at their own pace at home. As Dr. Burton White, the renowned educational psychologist and director of the Harvard Preschool Project, says, "School for four year olds is indefensible on educational grounds." [15] David Elkind, Tufts University psychologist, says, "Nursery school is not essential for healthy development." [16]

What the very young want, and urgently need, experts agree, is not education or socialization, but the affection and unhurried attention of their parents. [17]

The number of nursery schools and out-of-the-home programs has increased a thousand-fold since 1965. Yet, during that time there has been no improvement in achievement test scores at the elementary, junior high or high school level, illiteracy has increased, and there has continued to be a decline in SAT scores.

(d) Academic Burnout

Many early entrants (ages 4 and 5) are tired of school before they finish third or fourth grades. Top learning and development authorities warn that the earlier young children begin formal, institutional schooling the earlier they tend to burn out. [18]

ALTERNATIVES TO EARLY SCHOOLING

Compulsory kindergarten and four year old preschool is not the answer to our educational problems. Moreover, to date every state legislature in the country has rejected universal preschool as too costly. [19] Instead of concentrating on and investing vast amounts of money on institutional care and schooling, we need to focus on training parents and strengthening families. Mothers who want to stay home to rear their children need to be given the tax incentives to do so, as well as assistance in learning how to help their children.

Consideration should be given to successful alternative solutions that are not only preparing children for learning and achievement, but are also helping even functionally illiterate parents;

(1) Mother-Child Home Programs in New York, Chicago and other cities in which trained assistants visit homes at regular intervals to work with parents and suggest ways to nurture a child's development. The trainers provide ideas and directions for parents to use in providing a rich environment for children to learn and grow. Such programs avoid the need for large capital and operating expenditures that early-school proposals require.

(2) Parents As First Teachers program in Missouri, a home visitation program beginning in the last trimester of pregnancy up to the child's third year, which offers parents guidance and support to help promote the child's development. (Contact State Department of Education, Missouri)

(3) Through the U.S. Office of Education, Parents as Partners and other parent education programs are working successfully in Oregon, Washington, New York, Florida, Ohio, Missouri, Pennsylvania and other states.

(4) The Home and School Institute's parent-involvement workshops show parents how they can teach their children (preschool age and up) readiness skills, self confidence, motivation, perseverance, teamwork, responsibility, problem solving that make for academic achievement.

For 25 years the Home and School Institute has been teaching low-income Washington, D. C., parents how to get their children ready for learning and has experienced tremendous success there and in the 34 states their trainers are working in. The techniques work, even with functionally illiterate parents!

Through partnerships with major organizations (including Existing Chapter 1 programs, as well as private and public funding), the community outside of school, including unions, churches and other organizations, is mobilized to help kids learn and get parents into the habit of working with their children. (The Home & School Institute, Special Projects Office, 1201 16th Street, N.W., Washington, DC, 20036, 202/466-3633.)

Home and School Institute is a fine example of tangible results when a community looks to its own resources and creativity and not just to government to solve all its problems through increased taxation and bureaucracy. Even if there is a limited government subsidy to encourage this type of program, the cost is far less than financing kindergarten and preschool.

A number of states are encouraging this kind of approach in preparing children for school and ultimately for the work force.

CONCLUSIONS

We need more equipping of parents and less institutionalizing of young children. Rushing kids into preschool and kindergarten, as well as day care, is exacting a heavy price on our children's emotional, intellectual and social development, and weakening the influence and role of the family. The resulting social problems place even greater demands on private and governmental agencies, and more pressures on the taxpayers.

Cost-effective alternatives already exist that offer more training for parents (single and working), and place a high priority on child-rearing. Instead of more centralization and abdication of responsibility to the "experts," parents need to be empowered and encouraged to fulfill their roles.

Because in some families both parents (or a single parent) must work outside the home, is not a good reason to extend attendance ages for all children and add a day care aspect to public schools. Nor is the fact that some children are truly "at-risk" and need extra-parental enrichment good reason to make these programs available to all children. Not only are they unnecessary and expensive, but their mere availability may encourage some parents to take the path of least resistance and let someone else raise their children. This is a counter-productive luxury Oklahoma cannot afford.

If public policy in Oklahoma encourages excellence and responsibility in parenting skills, our children will become healthier emotionally and socially, will achieve better in school, and will be better able to handle the challenges of adulthood.

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