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Preschool Education

The education of 3- to 5-year-olds is no longer a subject of interest only to a few specialists and certain parents of young children. A combination of urgent need, new money, and fresh ideas has created a climate highly favorable to research and action.

The demand for more knowledge and better practice in preschool education springs from several sources. Children of poverty need help to break out of the cycle of inadequate education, low occupational skill, low pay. Many children in low-income and minority groups have neither adequate educational opportunities nor the ability to take full advantage of the meager opportunities they have. In addition, the last decade has seen a premium placed on the intellectual content of education, and people are asking why children cannot acquire significant intellectual skills before entering first grade and thus accelerate their progress. Recently the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association called for universal preschool education at public expense for 4- and 5-year olds.

In 1964 total preschool enrollment was 3,187,000 children, with 471,000 in nursery schools and 2,716,000 in kindergartens. The Office of Economic Opportunity began its preschool program, Operation Head Start, in the summer of 1965 and estimates that 550,000 children were enrolled in the 1966 summer program at a cost of \$110 million to the federal government. In only 2 years this one new federal program increased preschool enrollment by 17 percent.

Although we know comparatively little about the effectiveness of early-education techniques, it is increasingly clear that the preschool child is an extremely plastic organism capable of widely varying intellectual behavior under different conditions of environment and training. Jean Piaget's monumental work and other studies of the reception of information from the environment, information processing, and language and communication all demonstrate that the preschool child is developing intellectually as he grows physically and matures in emotional and social behavior. A corollary conclusion is that inadequate stimulation at early ages results in long-term deficiencies in cognitive functioning.

We do not have enough scientific knowledge to design with confidence the kinds of preschool programs that will meet the needs of young children. More research is called for on several levels—in the laboratory, to analyze and understand the relation of those environments to development; and in different settings, to evaluate the effects of many different approaches to early education.

At the same time society will not wait. Preschool education will inevitably become more and more widespread, but it is too soon to systematize early education. Increased public financial support is necessary, and it should be used to help develop the best of traditional nursery school education as well as radically different approaches. Television is an untapped resource, and its potential for early education should be fully tested.

A better understanding of the limits of early achievement—intellectual, social, emotional, and physical—is the key scientific problem in this area. Once we attain that understanding we will be able to decide on the appropriate objectives. At the same time, we should be sure our system of preschool education is broad enough and flexible enough to accommodate and test new ideas.—LLOYD N. MORRISSETT, Vice President, Carnegie Corporation of New York