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## Issues in the education of four-year-olds

Allyn R. Stocks  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Issues in the education of four-year-olds

### Abstract

In an attempt to examine the recent movement toward enrolling four-year-old children in academic programs, the need arises to consider the research base for early intervention. There have also been significant social, economic, and political forces that have guided this movement.

ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION  
OF FOUR-YEAR-OLDS

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by  
Allyn R. Stocks  
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In an attempt to examine the recent movement toward enrolling four-year-old children in academic programs, the need arises to consider the research base for early intervention. There have also been significant social, economic, and political forces that have guided this movement.

Early childhood appears to have become a ground on which to fight social battles which have little or nothing to do with sound early education for children (Elkind, 1986B; Kagan, 1989). In some cases the discussions of educational reform may have been a means of avoiding more dangerous issues. Education is less costly than creating new jobs or building new houses (Zigler, 1987). The end result is greater responsibility in the schools while the social problems which have the greatest impact on schooling are ignored (Zigler, 1986). "If we wish to improve the lives of the culturally disadvantaged, we must abandon the short-term 'solutions' of the 1960's and work for much deeper social reforms" (Zigler and Berman, 1983, p. 257). The evolving characteristics of American family life must be considered as part of the new social reforms.

## Societal Influences

### Demographics

In the next few years the changing demographics of family life in America will cause the schools' role in early childhood education to become even more pronounced. These demographic trends show ever-increasing numbers of single parent families and working mothers. By 1990, almost one-half the labor force will be women. Today, 60% of the mothers of children are employed outside the home (Day & Thomas, 1988). To consider the changing demographics by itself is insufficient. The reasons for the apparent shift in family values needs to be examined.

### Changing Values

What are some of the underlying causes for these apparent changes in our values? What factors enabled mothers to leave their children and enter the workforce? Society's concept of infants has undergone a transformation. From the Freudian era of psychology, the "sensual" child emerged. Today, the intellectual importance given to early childhood of the 1960's has brought forth a concept of the "competent" infant. During the era of the sensual child, middle-class values dictated that mothers stay at home and raise their children. Today, partly because of the women's

movement, the middle class value system has changed dramatically. The need for women to choose whether to pursue a career or stay at home coincided with a shift in the economy from industrial to postindustrial. This shift created a strong demand for women in the workplace. This shift in the economy also coincided with the concept of the competent infant--a child who could withstand prolonged separation from the primary care-giver.

Another change in the circumstances of the middle class contributed to the large number of women entering the workforce. Divorce became more socially acceptable and the divorce rate sky-rocketed. In more than 90 percent of all divorces, custody of the children is retained by the mother. Mothers, rarely able to subsist on alimony and child support, have entered the workforce.

A consequence of this social trend is that large numbers of preschool children are being cared for outside the home. Currently, the number of children receiving out-of-home care is estimated to be six million. By 1995, it is estimated that there will be 10 million children under six years old who will need some form of day-care (Day & Thomas, 1988). The increased demands for day care have put our society

under tremendous pressure to respond to these needs. Parents are becoming increasingly vocal in their insistence on all-day schooling for their preschool children.

### Social Dynamics

Many educators feel that the real pressure being placed upon politicians for all-day kindergarten and school for four-year-olds does not reflect a strong desire for infant academics, but the need for parents to have quality day-care (Futrell, 1987; Hymes, 1987; Kagan, 1989; Zigler, 1987). One educator even carried this concept a step farther by saying that the most common argument for opening the school doors to four-year-olds involves resurrecting the "in loco parentis" doctrine--in its extreme. "Schools will become adoption agencies and teachers will become surrogate parents" (Futrell, 1987, p. 251). While the need for consistent, high quality day-care is great, early schooling does not appear to be a workable solution. The facts point to the need for an entirely new type of family support system in the near future.

### Educational Reform

During the 1960's after the Russians launched Sputnik, fear mounted that our country was falling technologically behind the Russians. Some dramatic



changes were made in education programs. The resultant effect upon kindergarten programs was the move away from socialization and process toward an end product: reading. The blame for the failure to beat the Russians into space was placed on the educational system (Soderman, 1984). One explanation for the problems that supposedly plagued the educational system was that children were poorly prepared for school and that early childhood education should be strengthened academically so that children can move more rapidly once they enter school. The legislation that brought the Head Start Program to life was a direct result of this "strengthening." The politicians who sponsored this legislation called for specific, measurable results from programs such as Head Start. These results filtered down to become demonstrated increases in I.Q. scores, with near-disastrous consequences.

#### Early Emphasis on I.Q.

One of the basic concepts of Head Start was that education was the key to an improved life. It was assumed that the increased knowledge could help to break the cycle of poverty. "Knowing more" was translated into "becoming smarter," particularly in a nation engrossed by intelligence scores.

American preoccupation with I.Q. scores was

encouraged by previous research on animals involving deprivation early in life. This research suggested that early deprivation creates a permanent deficit in problem-solving ability. The concept of early enrichment programs for children, whose purpose was to counteract deprivation, came from these animal studies (Caldwell, 1970; Spicker, 1971). To assume that deprivation experienced by animals and deprivation experienced by economically disadvantaged children seemed logical--at that time.

Head Start was a victim of this popular fascination with intelligence. Head Start was designed with a much broader goal of improving child and family life. However, the first evaluation of Head Start focused entirely upon I.Q. scores which initially were higher, but then proceeded to fall off. Thus, it became fashionable to call Head Start a failure because the initial gains were not maintained after two or three years in elementary school. This "fade-out" phenomenon was interpreted to mean that there were no long-term benefits to be gained from a one-year Head Start Intervention Program (Weinberg, 1979).

### Intervention Programs

One source of the mounting momentum toward universal preschool education is the generalization of the effects of a few intervention programs for the economically disadvantaged. Head Start, The Perry Preschool Program, and the Brookline Early Education Program (BEEP) are all early intervention programs for the three- and four-year-old economically disadvantaged child. Many researchers have cited the results of these programs and then made generalizations based on the results of these programs to the population as a whole.

According to Edward F. Zigler (1986, 1987), the validity of drawing conclusions based on these programs is in doubt. First, the populations served by these projects were severely disadvantaged black children. The ability to generalize the results of these programs to the population as a whole is not conclusive. Secondly, the programs were all well designed and fully supported with a very low ratio of children to teacher (6:1). Finally, these programs provided for total family support, including medical and dental care. Such extensive support levels are likely to have contributed to the positive effects of early intervention programs for black, inner-city, low SES

children.

As a result of generalizations based on these well publicized programs, educators and decision makers in almost all of the states that provide programs for four-year-olds limit enrollment to low-income, handicapped, and in some cases non-English speaking children (Kagan, 1989).

If the findings of these programs cannot be generalized, more questions must be asked. Do all children deserve equal services and equal access to them? Do we continue to serve children in relatively segregated surroundings? What are some alternatives? In an attempt to find answers, it is important to take a closer look at some well-known intervention programs.

### Head Start

Since 1965, Head Start, a family of over 2,000 programs that share common goals, has provided an educational, health care, and social services program to an estimated nine million families. What all these efforts have in common is a commitment to enhancing the quality of life for children and families (Weinberg, 1979). These programs promote physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, as well as positive attitudes toward self, family, and society

(Zigler & Berman, 1983).

In 1969, four years after its inception, Head Start was evaluated. The study, called the Westinghouse Report, focused entirely on I.Q. scores. The report concluded that the summer Head Start Program was totally ineffective, and that the full-year program was only only slightly effective. The damage to the program and to the people who staffed it was considerable.

In a later analysis, Brown (1985) contended that the Westinghouse Study was flawed in three critical ways:

1. The research was conducted only after the children completed Head Start (no pretest was given).

2. The comparison (control) group was not selected until after the experimental group completed the program, by selecting children with similar characteristics to those children who participated in Head Start.

3. Cognitive measures were the only instruments used to evaluate these children.

In spite of the major setback in 1969, Head Start survived, largely because of a grass roots effort led by parents and staff. Child development workers, who had been convinced of the effectiveness

of the early model remained strong advocates for children and families (Brown, 1985). As a result of these and many other factors, the demand increased for early intervention in public schools.

In 1977, the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies released its report on the Head Start Program and the long-term effects of early intervention:

1. The number of children assigned to special education classes was reduced by participation in an early intervention program.

2. The number of children who were retained at grade-level was significantly reduced by participation in an early education program.

3. Participation in a preschool program produced an increase in I.Q. that was sustained during the children's early primary school years.

4. Children who participated in an organized preschool program expressed more pride in their achievements than those who did not participate (Brown, 1985). As a result of this study, the funding for Head Start was increased in 1977 by 150 million dollars--the first increase in ten years. Today, Head Start is looked upon as an unqualified success story in early intervention for economically disadvantaged children.

### Perry Preschool Program

This program was conducted in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The subjects were 123 three- and four-year-old black children born between 1958 and 1962. Each child went to school for two years. The child-teacher ratio was 5:1. The teachers were trained in both special education and early childhood education. Each teacher visited each child's home for 90 minutes per week (Barnett, 1985).

The findings of the study indicated a variety of significant, positive effects when a long-term analysis was done years later. For the experimental group some long-term effects were: better school performance; higher employment rates; less adolescent pregnancies; and lower crime rates (Blank, 1985; Robinson, 1987). The Perry Project was one of the very few studies which attempted a cost-benefit analysis. The cost of the program was approximately \$5,000 per child per year (Zigler & Berman, 1983). The long-term findings indicated that the benefits exceeded the cost by a ratio of 7:1 (Barnett, 1985). In addition, Ypsilanti teachers reported that Perry Preschool graduates behaved better than their controls and showed more academic motivation and potential. Featherstone (1986) indicated that perhaps Perry

alumni were treated differently; perhaps they received more remedial and support services.

Clearly this study is significant and has long-term implications for disadvantaged black children. However, for the program to have significant implications for public policy its findings must be generalizable. The overall findings of the study do not generalize to the population as a whole (for reasons mentioned earlier). Thus, the implications of this study are very limited. The long-term efficacy of early intervention for economically disadvantaged black children is supported by this study (Barnett, 1985). This information directly contradicts earlier findings (White, Bush & Casto, 1985).

#### Brookline Early Elementary Program (BEEP)

Any family residing in Brookline, Massachusetts, or adjoining suburbs of Boston was eligible to enroll in a long-term research effort undertaken by the Brookline Public Schools. The program was open to all children born between spring of 1973 and fall of 1974. To minimize the self-selection process (volunteers), families were recruited who ordinarily would not hear about or seek out such a program. By October, 1984, 285 families were enrolled. Of these families, 39% were minorities; 50% of the mothers had



less than a college education; 18% did not speak English as the first language in the home; and 12% were headed by a single parent. The ages of the mothers at enrollment ranged from 14 to 41 years. The overall attrition rate of the programs was about 10% per year (Pierson, Walker & Tivnan, 1984).

The program had three interrelated components: parent education and support, diagnostic monitoring, and education programs for children. BEEP was committed to the idea that the family was the most important educational force for the young child. The amount of parent education that was offered to each family was controlled by random assignment of families to one of three levels of program intervention.

Diagnostic monitoring occurred to insure that no child would develop an undetected health or developmental condition which might affect his or her learning. This was accomplished by periodic health and developmental exams given at eight different times during the five-year program.

Education programs for children began at age two when weekly playgroups were held for small groups. Each activity was geared to the developmental level of the child. Each child was given the opportunity to develop a sense of effectiveness, to explore

concepts, and to develop mastery and social skills essential to school performance (Featherstone, 1986).

From a research standpoint, the greatest design problem in the BEEP research was the lack of a control group. Without a control group no ongoing comparisons were possible. A comparison group was chosen after the study was nearly complete. Even though the characteristics of the comparison group were similar to the experimental group, the research validity of the failure to include a control group must be considered. The skills measured were: working independently, following directions, completing work successfully, getting along with other children, and class involvement. When reading skills were measured 19.3% of the BEEP children experienced difficulty while 32.5% of the comparison group had similar difficulty in reading. The essence of this long-term study is that cooperation, communication, and informal advocacy can enhance prospects for improved quality of life for children (Pierson, Walker & Tivnan, 1984).

In an analysis of BEEP, Edward Zigler (1987) indicated that the gains made by children of educated parents were far less than those made by children of less-educated parents. He further indicated that

such gains may be short-lived because no long-term assessment of the intervention and "control" groups had been carried out.

### Home-Based Intervention

Home-based intervention programs, particularly Home Start, employ lay and professional home visitors to work with families whose children are at-risk of developmental or health problems. Unlike the formal intervention programs mentioned earlier, Home Start is based upon the idea that every effort should be made to meet children's needs in the home. These needs are best understood, according to the program, within the framework of the family.

The goal of home-based intervention is not to provide families with direct support services, but to enhance parent empowerment to enable families to help themselves. However, the problem of being poor sometimes overshadows other critical issues. Caldwell (1970) stated that many home environments do not always manifest a lack of concern for the children; most of the parents are simply so overwhelmed with other problems that raising children took a backseat to the pressing needs of survival. Parents who cannot meet their own basic needs are not able to meet their children's needs. Being poor,

substandard housing, lack of medical care, and other related problems are more immediate to poor parents than the development of a positive and nurturing relationship with their children (Halpern, 1986).

In many instances it is likely that the problems of the poor, which are a result of being poor, can outweigh what is important for children. It certainly appears that, without question, the four-year-old child whose needs are not being met in an impoverished home would benefit from an early preschool intervention program.

Without regard for income level or race, getting kids off to a good start in life is a universally acclaimed goal (Kagan, 1989). Preventing problems before they begin and maintaining the integrity of the family are concepts that reflect the American cultural view. This view reflects beliefs about what is important for children and families. Early childhood education must also reflect the beliefs and values of individual communities. The goals of the program must coincide with the values of the cultural group to which the child belongs.

For children whose home environment provides limited opportunities for growth, or for children

whose home environment is stress-filled, supplemental education and developmental opportunities may be needed at an early age. The writer believes that it is the responsibility of every community to provide a variety of opportunities to meet the needs of children and their families.

While the needs of preschool children vary considerably, it is recognized by developmental experts that the primary need of four-year-olds is to play (Elkind, 1986B; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986). Children at age four or five have a genuine need for recreation and socialization--the real business of preschoolers (Elkind, 1986B). The quantity and quality of time they spend playing are later seen (or observed lacking) in their creative thought, ability to make decisions, and potential for coping in stressful situations (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986). In order for a preschool program to be successful, ample opportunities must be available for children to socialize--a key component in a sound program.

Another equally important ingredient of a successful program must include what some researchers view as the single greatest variable associated with intervention effectiveness--parental involvement in the program (Caldwell, 1970; Elkind, 1986A; Riley,

1986; White, Bush & Casto, 1985). The absolute need for parents to consistently participate in their children's program is essential to the success of the program. For a program to successfully meet the needs of children, an integral component of the program must be parental involvement. The home environment is still a major factor which shapes all future learning (Waksman, 1980; Caldwell, 1983).

#### Academic vs. Developmental Programs

While support from parents is critical to the success of an early intervention program, the effects of oversupport or overly high parental expectations for academic achievement can have destructive long-term effects upon a four-year-old child. The danger inherent in an academic program for four-year-olds is that parents might end up pushing their children and grasping anxiously for success in tangible, measurable areas (Hymes, 1987). This "miseducation", putting children at-risk of failure for no purpose, has significant implications for the children (Elkind, 1986B).

Most academic programs are based on formal instruction. Formal instruction at the preschool level can be devastating to children because of the amount of stress associated with it. Young children

are self-directed learners. To require them to focus entirely upon one concept until it is learned produces stress that ultimately threatens a child's motivation to learn (Elkind, 1986B).

Another risk present in formal instruction at the preschool level is the social comparison which turns the child away from self-directed learning. The concepts of "correct" and "incorrect" cause the child to focus on adults for approval, and to look to their peers for self-appraisal. Therefore, why put children at-risk? There does not appear to be any solid evidence that formal instruction has lasting benefits.

A sound early childhood program recognizes children's intellectual, social, and physical needs and encourages them to initiate their own learning activities within a supportive environment that is based on a child development curriculum. A good child development curriculum is rooted in the learning value of children's play. Child-initiated activity, or "play" is the self-directed component of children's learning. The best early childhood activities are child-initiated and developmentally appropriate.

The feelings of many early childhood educators

are summed up by James L. Hymes (1987): "Four-year-olds will be in trouble unless there is consensus on the basic reason for having schools for them. It must be understood that the goal of their school is to help them live their four-year-old life with richness and vigor; no report cards, no achievement tests, no retention, no homework, no textbooks" (p. 52).

Clearly, the greatest danger lies in exposing preschool children to a first grade or kindergarten curriculum and methods which are inappropriate for their stage of development. The idea of a structured, formal curriculum being "kicked down" to the preschool level has caused many educators to conclude that four-year-olds do not belong in school (Blank, 1985; Caldwell, 1983; Elkind, 1986A; Futrell, 1987; Riley, 1986; Soderman, 1984; Zigler, 1987). By exposing young children to a formal curriculum, they are being deprived of their most precious possession--their childhood. A child's chronological age is no guarantee of readiness for preschool. Just because a child is four-years-old does not mean he or she is ready to enter school. A review of pupil age at kindergarten entrance suggests that readiness and maturity are still more important to success than



preschool or day care experience (DiPasquale, Moule & Flewelling, 1980; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986).

Many parents are pushing young children into formal schooling before they are ready. These people have good intentions, but they are poorly informed. Being intelligent and showing readiness to begin formal schooling are two very real, but very distinct and separate issues. "When children enter formal school before they are developmentally ready to cope with it, their chances for failure increase" (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986, p. 11).

When some parents and educators argue that children should begin school at age four they may be overlooking the fact that even in kindergarten many children have trouble with symbols and rules. If five-year-olds have difficulty with formal learning, then it is even more difficult for four-year-olds.

Our country does not appear to be headed in the direction of universal preschool education for four-year-olds. Knowledge of the dangers inherent in formal instruction for four-year-olds is becoming increasingly widespread. Also, the cost of expanding current programs to reach all four-year-olds would be many billions of dollars. Based on research

that indicates that gains made by children of educated parents were far fewer than those made by children of less educated parents, this is a cost that would apparently exceed the benefits (Zigler, 1986; Zigler & Berman, 1983).

#### Commentary

There are some implications for the above research as it affects the school administrator. Initially, administrators need to recognize the validity of specific research, particularly as it applies to at-risk children. School personnel need to stay on top of current research in this area, to become ever more knowledgeable in order to meet the needs of their communities.

What are a community's needs for preschool children? Clearly, an extensive assessment of community values and priorities is required. Also, a needs assessment to determine the specific population to be served is essential. Once the priorities are established and a population is identified, then it is necessary to focus on research in order to establish a sound program for young children that is developmentally appropriate to their needs.

After a program is chosen, then the focus should be on staffing and, particularly, on the minimum

qualifications for each staff member. Ideally, each professional staff member who supervises preschool children would have a strong knowledge base in early childhood education. To make such a program successful the involvement of parents must be one of the primary focuses of the program--from its inception onward. And finally, a continuous assessment of the program is necessary to build in accountability and feedback in order to keep such a program strong and headed in the right direction.

Currently, there seems to be a gathering momentum to shift the emphasis of intervention away from early childhood to secondary education. Too often, it is the symptoms that receive treatment and not the cause. As these symptoms of at-risk life emerge, such as teen pregnancy and drop-outs, they become more visible to the community-at-large. However, as Zigler and Berman (1983) have commented, "Intervention at later stages of life can no more wipe out a history of disadvantage than can a brief early intervention program inoculate a child against continuing disadvantage" (p. 898). Samuel Sava (1985) states that patience is necessary to see the results of any program: "If we are to avoid one cycle after another of convulsive, disruptive 'reform'

every decade or so, we must overcome our habit of expecting every good educational idea to produce dramatic results tomorrow morning" (pp. 9-10).

Based on these arguments, it is clear that disadvantaged preschool children need a program to promote school success which, in turn, would lead to greater success in adult life--and hopefully would include significantly reduced rates of delinquency, teenage pregnancy, welfare usage, and higher rates of high school graduation and long-term employment (Cheever & Ryder, 1986).

#### Conclusion

All four-year-old children need an environment which will enhance the development of their cognitive abilities, academic skills, competence, and positive self-concept during the critical years of their development. All four-year-old children belong in an enriched, safe and supportive environment. Ordinarily, such an environment exists in the home.

If a child exists in an environment that is culturally, socially, and emotionally sterile, then intervention is appropriate and necessary for this child. However, if a child's home is a safe and supportive environment in which the total needs of the child are met, then the best place for this

four-year-old child is at home.

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