

Lessons From Early Childhood Education

Children begin learning from the moment they are born. Parents are their child's first and primary teacher. Preschool is available for those that pursue it and can afford it. Formal schooling traditionally begins in kindergarten in both public and private schools. Education is all around us, but how did we get to this point? In particular, as a Head Start Director, I want to know how we got to this point in early childhood education, the history of it. Are there any conclusions or supports that can be drawn from how early childhood education came to be? In this day and age we have the pressure of testing as a means for showing student achievement. More emphasis has been placed on academics in kindergarten. In my school district, kindergarten looks more like the first grade of ten years ago. This testing pressure is also impacting preschools as they become less about preparing children for success in kindergarten, which focused on social and emotional adjustments, and more about preparing children for academics. Do children know the letters of the alphabet, especially the letters in their name? Can they hold a pencil in a way that will encourage and support their hand writing skills? "Early childhood education has been an agent of social change throughout the decades" (Hinitz, 1983). Can it continue to be an agent of change and at the same time effectively deal with these pressures? In an effort to do what is right for young children can the history of early childhood education provide any answers about how to respond to this desire for accountability?

In the United States we have always expected children to learn to read, because it was necessary to read the Bible. With a smaller, more rural population there was little demand for schools, education was in the home. “In America as far back as the colonial period, young children were expected to learn to read as early as age 3 or 4, with instruction given at home by father to their children until the establishment of primary schools, required by the Puritan School Law of 1647 in Massachusetts” (Spodek, 1988). As we entered the mid-nineteenth century we experienced the development of urban schools and with this we saw a “greater distinction made between young children, older children, and adults” (Spodek, 1988). This greater distinction meant that how we taught children had to be different to meet different needs. It meant that we needed to think differently about how we provided lessons for the youngest of the students. This started us on a road that ended with us having created the field of early childhood education.

When you consider which approaches are available essentially there are “three major theoretical perspectives influencing early childhood curriculum... (1) cultural transmissionist; (2) maturationist naturalism; and (3) constructivism” (Hyun, 2000). Cultural transmissionists’ view “learning and development as a continuous set of changing behaviors governed by the principles of conditioned learning rather than as a series of age-bound behaviors” (Hyun, 2000). Johann Amos Comenius (1592 – 1670) is from this perspective (Hyun, 2000) and it is his *School of Infancy* that provides us with “the first published guidance for out-of-home education of children between the ages of three and seven. It emphasized a play curriculum, attractive surrounding,

and both men and women teachers who were better trained and better paid than those in schools for older students” (Hewes, 1995).

The maturationist naturalism perspective provides us with Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827) and Friedrich Froebel (1782 – 1852) and their belief is that individuals have a “biologically coded schedule of development” (Hyun, 2000). Pestalozzi and Froebel are both from Germany, although both were not equally accepted there. Due to his support of education in the home for younger children, Pestalozzi is practically a hero in his homeland. Froebel on the other hand believed in education outside of the home for younger children and the German population felt that this was an attack against the family (Sophia Baader, 2004). Froebel’s concept was much more acceptable in the United States since society was dealing with the integration of millions of immigrants. “The publicly funded kindergartens were organized to foster the integration of immigrant families into the American way of life” (Hinitz, 1983). Schools are a reflection of society, so as our society attempted to integrate a growing immigrant population schools also had to complete that task. “The child’s integration into society was to begin in the pre-school years, and the kindergarten provided an exemplary microcosm for practicing the necessary skills. The kindergarten was seen in the United States as a way of ‘making citizens.’ This is also the reason why the kindergarten so rapidly became a part of the public school systems” (Sophia Baader, 2004).

“After reading the forgotten works of Comenius and experiencing the Swiss school of Pestalozzi, he (Froebel) introduced methods that stressed individualized learning through play and the creative use of sequenced materials, music and games” (Hewes, 1995). Froebel, with influences

from Comenius and Pestalozzi was able to develop the concept of the kindergarten. This was one of the biggest developments of the nineteenth century in early childhood education and made Friedrich Froebel the father of kindergarten, it had “the greatest impact on the field” (Spodek, 1988) of early childhood education.

Kindergarten is still with us today and it is incorporated in the public school system. However, there was a point in the early twentieth century where there was a split at the kindergarten level. There were those who believed they were true believers of Froebel because they liked and followed his sequenced curriculum, however they “lacked the faith of Froebel in children’s innate ability to grow and develop and learn” (Hewes, 1995). The impact on kindergartens was that these educators “thought that by simply using their old authoritarian discipline and adding standardized commercial equipment they would achieve their goals of superior children and adults” (Hewes, 1995). On the other side of the split we have – “Those Froebelian kindergartners who believed that children should be empowered to carry out independent and joyous learning were routed off onto an alternate roadway – but it eventually led to the early childhood practices of today” (Hewes, 1995). Essentially this split created the kindergarten that we see today in public schools and the field of early childhood education. One other impact from Friedrich Froebel comes not from him but from an individual who believed in his approach; Patty Smith Hill. “She shrewdly organized a multi-disciplinary campaign to improve the route of the true Froebelians and she involved mothers in its development through the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and other organizations. Much of what today’s students study in early childhood education classes has come directly from the coordinated actions taken at that time, for she organized an interdisciplinary Committee on Nursery Schools

that had its first annual meeting in 1926” (Hewes, 1995). As we have a split that created kindergarten and early childhood education, we also have Patty Smith Hill working to make sure the true nature of Froebel’s methods were not lost and it is actually what makes up much of the coursework of early childhood education.

While Froebel is considered by many to be the father of early childhood education it is interesting to note that his approach is from the maturationist naturalism perspective and yet most early childhood curriculums reside within the third major perspective; constructivism. Representatives of this perspective are John Dewey (1859 – 1952), Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) and Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980). “Influenced by J. Piaget’s cognitive driven theory of child development, constructivistic orientation sees that environment and organism interact with each other” (Hyun, 2000). Constructivism dominates early childhood education. Hyun lists the curriculums that adhere to the constructivist perspective and they include the HighScope curriculum, the Montessori curriculum, the Creative curriculum and the Reggio Emilia curriculum, to name a few (Hyun, 2000). A Head Start curriculum is listed, but such a curriculum does not actually exist or at least there is no specific curriculum required to be used by Head Start programs. Most Head Start programs I interact with either use the HighScope curriculum, the Creative curriculum or the Montessori curriculum.

Conclusion

The questions I sought answers to were; are there any conclusions or supports that can be drawn from how early childhood education came to be? And in an effort to do what is right for young children can the history of the early childhood education provide any answers about how to respond to this pressure for accountability? The answer is yes there is something to be learned or

perhaps it is not to be learned as if it were something we did not know but rather something that we need to be reminded about.

Comenius teaches us that you get what you pay for, and we need to pay for the best teachers. He wrote that we should use the best trained and best paid teachers and that they should be men and women. This is a lesson that we as a society need to learn; a quality education has to start with early childhood educators. The most impact on a child's educational career is going to be in early childhood, so it makes the most sense to have the best teachers in those classrooms. This in turn means you have to pay for it and right now preschool teachers are not always on the same pay scale as K-12 teachers, let alone on a higher pay scale.

Friedrich Froebel reminds us of the rest of what we need to know. We should stress "individualized learning through play" and have faith "in children's innate ability to grow and develop and learn" (Hewes, 1995). It is also important that we believe "that children should be empowered to carry out independent and joyous learning" (Hewes, 1995). What this is essentially telling us is that while we will have deal with, and cannot set aside, the issue of accountability we should remember that active learning on the part of children is still how they learn best. We are in control of how we teach and if we can focus on the long term and not become fixated with the short term issue of accountability then we will recognize that what we need to do is focus on the quality of the services we provide. Children are born to learn and we should encourage and nourish that and if we do that effectively then we will have provided a quality education and the issue of accountability will become moot.

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