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Nancy Balaban

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# Choosing Priorities for Young Children

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The author is Director of the Infant and Parent Development Program in the Graduate School at Bank Street College.

## CHOOSING PRIORITIES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Nancy Balaban

As we sift out priorities for young children today we wrestle with uncounted variables. Before making our choices, however, we need to think about the nature of today's young children. Are they different? Have they changed? How do they learn? What do they need?

In a recent paper on the changing American child, Herbert Zimiles (1982) distilled the comments of 170 teachers of middle class children of kindergarten through high school age. These teachers had each been in the classroom for over 20 years. One of the most powerful change agents in children's lives that they named, which will surprise no one, is television. A task force of the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that by the time children have graduated from high school they will have spent more time watching television than attending school, resulting in, among other things, obesity, lack of physical fitness and a distorted view of life (N.Y. Times, 1/21/87).

The teachers in Zimiles' study described today's children as knowing more, at least on the surface, as more independent and as more verbal than pretelevision children. They thought kindergartners nowadays seem to resemble the first and second graders of years ago.

Because of television, children are included in aspects of the adult world that were closed to them 25 or 30 years ago. Perhaps that is why they seem to be growing up more rapidly. "Some of the mystery and the difference between the life of the child and the adult no longer obtains," Zimiles observes (p.41).

As a result, have teachers and parents changed their beliefs about young children? Has this led us to choose the importance of skill learning over content and concepts; the learning of answers over the process of solving a problem? Has this reported blurring of the boundaries between child-life and adult-life contributed to the current pressure to teach formal academics in kindergartens and preschools? In his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman (1982) notes that children's exposure to adult "secrets" serves to push them

pell-mell into the adult's realm. "The electric media find it impossible to withhold any secrets." "Without secrets," he adds, "there can be no such thing as childhood" (p.80).

Do we, today's adults, believe that childhood has really disappeared and that we can do nothing to stem the tide? Do we regard children as miniature forms of ourselves because they are privy to information formerly withheld from them?

Many years ago my now grown daughters used to dash home from elementary school to watch the "soaps" with their sitter. I found myself explaining to them, at an age when I deemed it inappropriate, such words as "impotence," "artificial insemination," "patricide," and "infidelity." "Television allows children to hear and see news of world conflicts, violence, and danger at the same time and in the same manner as their parents and not when and how their parents choose to communicate this information to them," Zimiles states (p.27). Many parents are unprepared for their children's early and rapid movement into the adult world and may misinterpret their children's sophisticated language for real knowledge. In the Zimiles' study, the rise in divorce in single parent families and in women working outside the home was linked with less adult reliability in the lives of children--a further widening of the gap between children and their childhood.

Balancing priorities in this situation seems to call for standing on our heads. Can we educators help parents to limit their children's exposure to television while also enabling their children to become critical viewers? Can we educate parents to help their children understand the difference between the commercials and the program and know that commercials are designed to sell a product? Can we help children think about television presentations that distort reality? Since most parents of young children were themselves reared on media, this is a formidable task.

Are we adults too impatient to get children on the fast track? Are we unable to look at children "from inside out" as Dorothy Cohen advised (Cohen, Stern & Balaban, 1983)? Do we fail to see their squirming, wiggling, jumping, reaching, touching as their special and positive way of learning? It is regrettable when adults look past children instead of at them as did two well educated parents of an eighteen month old. They had come to enroll their daughter in the Bank Street Family Center, a facility for children under three, and complained about not finding a computer there. What was it that led them to think that a computer was a suitable activity for a one and a

half year old toddler? This is not an extreme example though it may appear to be. A few years ago, one of my students was conducting a parents' workshop for mothers of nine month olds. The mothers had a question about the use of television with their babies. The question was not whether their infants should watch television, but which programs. Certainly we need to be cognizant of this technological presence, but are we losing sight of the child?

Lately, I have become aware of a trend that I've facetiously dubbed "change the child." If the child doesn't fit the program, the current thinking goes, then change the child. It seems that kindergartens have been incorporating more of the pencil and paper work that used to be the province of the first grade. And now pre-k's are catching the "pencil and paper" fever. Pregnant women are even encouraged to read to their in-utero fetus. Yet when the program becomes too advanced for the four or five year old, the advice given to parents is hold your child back a year. There seems to be no thought given to designing programs to fit the child. This is a priority that many educators and parents are now espousing. It bears our attention.

Many schools are encouraging a change in the age of entrance to kindergarten. I find this trend ironic because it derives from a train of thought based on a series of false assumptions such as the following. Children are developing more rapidly. They need to learn earlier. So we must make kindergarten and nursery programs more academic. However, a lot of children are having difficulties learning the skills we teach. Therefore, we will solve this problem by pushing up the kindergarten entrance age rather than examining the content of the programs we are offering young children.

According to a report in the New York Times (11/20/86), more than half the states have moved up their entrance age requirements. Many schools are urging parents not to send their children to kindergarten unless they are at least five years six months of age. In New York City, an informal survey revealed that many kindergartens in private schools use workbooks and teach writing, phonics and reading skills as well as computers.

These programs have become too stressful for many young children because their design and content are out of sync with the nature of about-to-be five and five year olds. This is illustrated by a recent study of children who started kindergarten before their fifth birthday. Uphoff & Gilmore (1985) found that these early entrance children made up 75% of the upper grade failures. Their academic

problems--lower scores on tests, failures, referrals for learning disabilities--often persisted throughout their school careers. In contrast, another group with the same June through October birthdays, who delayed starting kindergarten by one year, accounted for none of the failures.

It is clear that the older children did better because the program was more suited to them. The kindergarten was no longer a kindergarten. The children weren't the problem; the program was the problem.

Too much, too soon for too many young children, say the researchers. According to another study (Soderman quoted by Uphoff & Gilmore, 1985), the American Academy of Pediatrics has expressed concern about the dramatic increase of stress-related symptoms seen in young children. In fact, the above mentioned news article from the New York Times featured a box headlined "Stress Signals in Kindergartners" advising parents to pay close attention to the child who:

- insists either that the school work is too hard or boring
- says that he or she has no friends
- says that he or she does not want to go to school
- constantly asks the teacher if it is time to go home
- reverts to thumb sucking, infantile speech, nail biting or bedwetting.

In his keynote address at the 1987 conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, president elect David Elkind warned that pushing three, four and five year olds was leading to childhood stress, depression and learning problems. Children in classrooms where there was a back-to-basics curriculum were found in a study at the University of Rochester, to be turned off from learning altogether even though their achievement scores were higher (New York Times 10/7/86).

Granting priority to earlier and earlier academic preparation which culminates in "teach your baby to read" must be re-evaluated by those who have chosen it. In a somewhat perverse way, I think that development has "won out" because kindergarten has become "too hard" for kindergartners. Will we begin once more to look at the child in order to design the program? Will we choose priorities that favor the child?

What do we believe about children? Do we agree with Jean, a teacher whose work is examined in great depth by Margaret Yonemura, that children bring "a wealth of knowledge to school with them" (Yonemura, 1987, p.26)? Do we believe that children push from within to learn from the very moment of their birth? Do we believe that children's passions for autonomy and for making things happen in their environment constitute the core of the learner? Do we set our priorities on what we believe?

We are asked continually these days to think about what young children learn when we should be examining how they learn. How do children construct their knowledge of the world and people? How do children become literate? How do children learn mathematics? Many voices out there would have us believe that it is through drill, through worksheets, through computers.

In a recent article, Williams & Kamii (1985) remind us that mindless manipulation of objects is not the way that children learn. Rather they obtain two kinds of knowledge through manipulation of objects in situations that are personally meaningful and in which there are opportunities for them to make decisions. Children obtain physical knowledge of an object's characteristics--smoothness, roughness, sharpness--and logicomathematical knowledge by mentally constructing relationships between objects--smaller than, larger than, heavier than, four, seven (Williams & Kamii, 1985). To accomplish such mental growth children need time. They need to be in contact with a wide variety of well chosen materials, playthings and of course, peers. The authors write, "when teachers correct worksheets, children learn that the teacher is the only one who determines which answers are right" (p.26).

What do we value: the correct answer or the process of solving the problem? What do we believe: that the child is a pitcher into which we pour information or a persistent builder of bridges from questions to answers?

A report on early childhood education issued by the New York State Commissioner of Education (1986) praised a study done by Miller and Bizzel showing that

while children who attended kindergartens where the curriculum stressed drill and practice scored impressively on initial tests, they did not for the most part retain these gains. On the other hand, children who attended programs that emphasized



strengthening attitudes toward learning, fostering creativity, and providing time for exploration and experimentation showed less impressive gains but greater benefits over long periods of time.

Recently, I had an experience that bears witness to this study. I assumed that I knew about floating and sinking, but I was wrong. Some friends and I needed to create an extra step in a swimming pool to aid a disabled person to get out more easily. First we tried placing a plastic milk container crate under the pool ladder but the crate didn't sink. "It weighs less than the water," my friend observed. He placed two crowbars through the crate and set it in place beneath the ladder at the bottom of the pool. While this seems a very obvious solution, the experience served to make an old truth into a new discovery for me. Water, I understood again, is a material with weight and thus the disabled person, whose back was injured, felt more comfortable in water than in air where he weighed relatively less. Subsequently I came to understand the concept of displacement in water. If I still need to learn this way, surely children need to, and with more time and experiences. Perhaps adults have lost touch with their own learning. Perhaps they don't like to admit this kind of re-understanding because it's too embarrassing. What do we believe about the uses of play, unstructured materials and the role of everyday experiences for the growth and development of young children? Can we advocate these seemingly old-fashioned beliefs in the face of the glitter of technology?

Writing about the use of computers in early childhood education, Harriet K. Cuffaro (1984) likens them to workbooks. She uses the example of learning directionality: up, down; in, out; right, left. Computers are "far removed from the situation in which directionality is learned and named" (p.562). Young children, she reminds us, learn these concepts through their interactions with the environment by crawling under tables, climbing on jungle gyms, bumping into, getting out of the way of, and playing with other children.

How do children learn to read and write? Must they be led by the nose? Does the magnetic pull of television dull their interest?

Little children want to write (Graves, 1982; Gibson, 1976). It is their most legitimate method of entering the adult province. Three year olds, when asked, have been found to identify writing as different from drawing on their own crayoned works.



I watched three year old Amelia making "signs" for some Lego constructions that were placed on a window sill in her nursery school classroom. She took folded cards from a box near the block corner on which her teacher had printed words formerly dictated by children who had been building. Using the pen that the teacher kept in the box, Amelia "wrote" in circular scribbles on several of the cards. "What are you writing?" I asked. She answered me seriously in a measured "reading" tone of voice, "Nobody do anything. Nobody do anything." She also explained that her writing was called "scripting," in contrast to her teacher's printing. She clearly understood much about writing and reading.

In too many instances children come to school eager to write, only to be told that their scribbles, their invented spellings, their upside down letter are not acceptable. They learn that writing is something arduous that you do in a workbook, in a certain way, between the lines. In our zeal to educate young children in adult fashion are we killing instead of building up the childhood of children?

To learn to read, young children need to explore and experiment with words and with writing in much the same way that they interact with blocks, paint and clay. Reading is not a mechanical process; it involves garnering meaning from the printed page. Children need "meaningful interactions with print" (Kontos, 1985, p.64).

Children learn to read in a "literacy rich environment" (Kontos, 1985; Schickendanz, 1985) composed of massive doses of story-book reading and re-reading, looking at and handling books, dictating stories, and writing with the teacher in many different forms such as lists, messages and memos. In her book *More than ABC's: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing*, Judith Schickendanz suggests that paper and pencils be kept in the dramatic play area and that labels, signs and charts of all sorts be used throughout the classroom.

In Amelia's classroom the teacher makes signs for children's block buildings and saves the signs in a small box for their re-use. The signs are serious statements of each child's self:

Sam wrote: Don't knock it down. Don't bring it home. Don't break it. Don't take it off.

Sarah wrote: I made an important building and not big people could go under it.

It is broad knowledge about print that children need to acquire before they move on to letter identification and letter-sound

correspondence (Kontos, 1985). Literacy begins in infancy with what Sally Provence calls a "social speaking partner." It develops in a context of adults who use reading and writing in their daily lives and who enjoy books of their own as well as reading to children.

I asked two teachers of five and six year olds how they selected priorities in their classrooms. F. has been teaching in an urban private school for several years. M. teaches in a suburban public school and has over 20 years of experience. They spoke about children learning to write and read. Both expressed the belief that formal reading should not begin until children were six or seven but both did more formal work on a one-to-one basis with children who demonstrated their readiness to read by their interest, their ability to sit still and pay attention for a period of time and their skill at identifying letters and sounds.

These two teachers face different administrative priorities. M. said that workbooks were the administration's priorities while playtime where children learn to work together as well as on their own were her priorities. Since the administration is less likely to hover over a more experienced teacher like herself, M. holds off using the workbooks until December, so that the children have significant opportunity to use hands-on materials, manipulatives and their bodies. F's priorities and the administration's are more congruent--neither values workbooks.

Both teachers based their decisions about children on their belief that children were learners and that they needed adult help to develop as learners and to become socially cooperative. F. encourages children to write early in the year. Two afternoons a week she schedules "Writer's Workshop" in which children use their invented spelling or drawings in order to say what they wish to set down. She supports this effort in many different ways: by taking dictated stories, by writing lists with children and by posting written materials related to the children's activities in many parts of the room. She is serious about their written products.

But F's priorities are blocks. Every week these five and six year old children plan and construct a block city. They play in it all week and put it away on Friday. They learn how to construct a social environment based on cooperation and they work to conceptualize how a city works, what its needs are, how its problems are solved. These are skills that budding readers need. It's not enough to know that children learn through manipulating objects, through their own spontaneous dramatic play, through their interactions with other

children and the environment, if you don't also believe it--and act on it.

It's not enough to know that young children learn deeply through their own experimentation, their own wrong answers, their own temporary inabilities, if teachers don't hear what children say and listen seriously.

I watched a first grade teacher talking with a girl who was building a supermarket in the block area. "How does the food get into the store?" the teacher asked her. "Well, the trucks drive up this ramp to the roof and throw the food down. People catch it and take it inside. "I see," the teacher commented. "Suppose the delivery is eggs. Then what?" The child sat back, looked intently at the teacher, took a deep breath and said, "Could you please help somebody else?" Having stirred up the waters, the teacher withdrew. Later on we saw the girl tape two blocks together and push them, truck-like, to the door of the market. "Eggs comin' in," she called to those inside. This teacher knew how a first grader thinks. She also believed that this is how a first grader learns.

By what means do teachers arrive at priorities? Teaching does not always lend itself to reflection--mostly because we teachers are too busy teaching. Surface activities are very consuming and often teachers do not realize that below that surface lies a rich mine of experiences, feelings and beliefs--the real force that motivates our behavior. In her book, *A Teacher at War*, Margaret Yonemura (1987) investigates these "invisible presences" (she is quoting Virginia Woolf) that influence the stream of one teacher's teaching. Jean, the teacher, believed that children "are not wildflowers that grow without human intervention" (p.32). Her beliefs about children and her beliefs about herself as a teacher and decision maker fed her teaching actions. How can we as teachers and teacher educators reflect more deeply on our own beliefs and values to know where the wellsprings of our teaching decisions lie?

Recently I had occasion to speak with a teacher who was concerned about her inability to be appropriately firm with a two-and-a-half year old. As we explored this question, she recalled that her own teachers yelled at children who did not obey their rules. She was frightened when they yelled and so always did what she was told. When she misbehaved at home, her mother yelled, too, and she cried. Not wanting to be a yelling teacher, she had not yet found the way to be firm. In examining the kind of teacher she wished to be, she also had to examine the process of getting there. Because she is

in a supportive learning environment, she will be able to refine her views of the child, her views of herself and her beliefs. She will be able eventually to answer the question I recently heard a youngster ask his teacher, "Alice, why are you growing up being a teacher?" The more we teachers feel supported in our growth and development, the more we will be able to support the children in our care and their parents. Are these the priorities for the eighties?

As we choose our priorities, there is a particular issue for all teachers and child care providers that profoundly affects young children. It is the issue of dramatically low salaries in the early childhood field. A recent report carried in the *Child Care Action News* (Whitebook, 1986) reveals that women who provide child care earn less than bartenders, parking lot attendants and zookeepers. In Westchester County, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, 20% of the child care providers qualify for public assistance. A study being conducted by Anne Mitchell at Bank Street College surveyed pre-k programs in 2773 school districts. Paraprofessionals were found to be earning an average of \$7,000 a year. Many of them were required to have either high school diplomas or equivalency degrees and to work 30 to 35 hours a week, 40 weeks a year (Report on Preschool Programs, 12/10/86, p.7).

While the needs for child care are presently expanding, the turnover rate of teachers is alarmingly high. A recent survey of child care in New York State found a 40% annual turnover rate for teachers, assistant teachers and aides (New York Times 11/10/86). Low salaries not only drive people out of the profession but serve as a subsidy for the entire child care delivery system. When a society's priorities place children and their care at the low end of the scale, we need to carry out our commitment to children not only in the classroom but beyond it.

*Nancy Balaban is Director of the Infant and Parent Development Program in the Graduate School at Bank Street College and author of two recently published books: One for teachers, Starting School: From Separation to Independence (Teachers College Press, 1985) and one for parents, Learning to Say Goodbye (New American Library, 1986).*

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