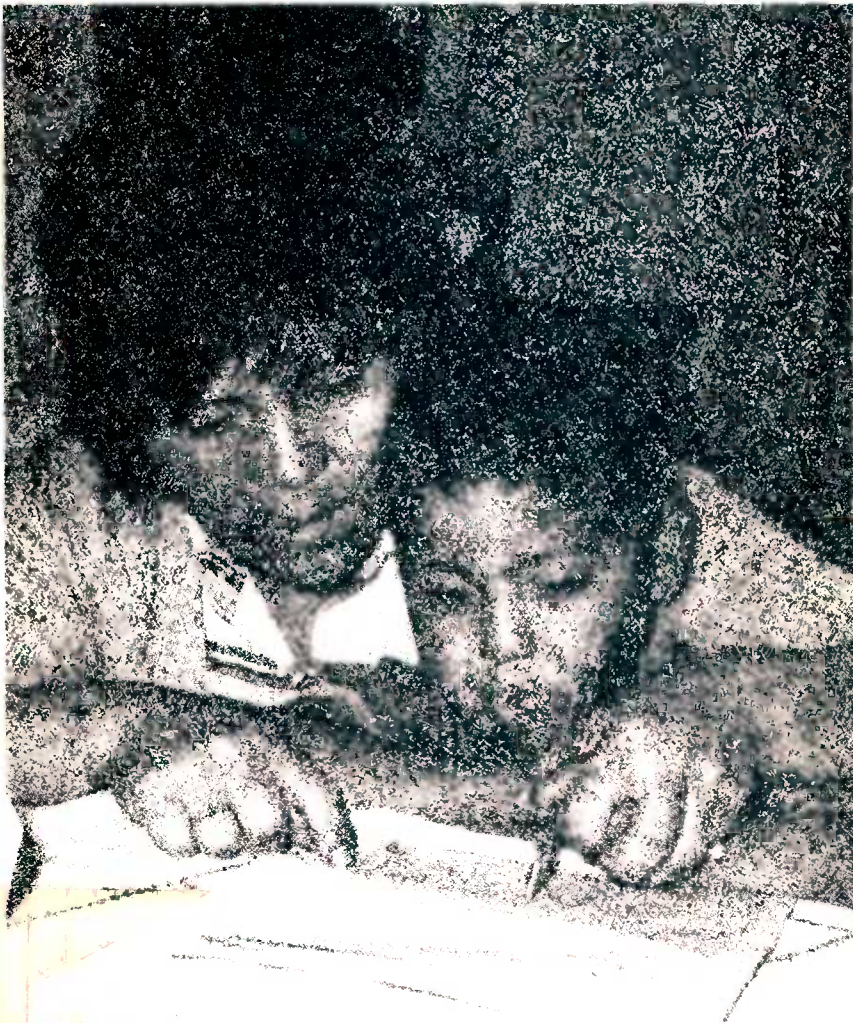

Preventing School Failure:

*The Relationship Between
Preschool and Primary Education*



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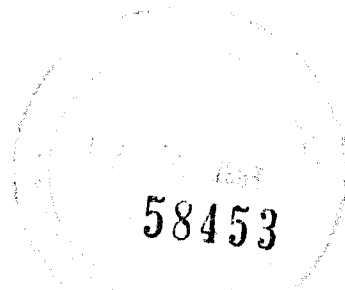
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**Proceedings of a workshop on preschool research
held in Bogota, Colombia, 26-29 May 1981**



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Résumé

Cette publication contient les exposés présentés au cours d'un séminaire sur la relation entre l'éducation préscolaire et primaire qui a été tenu à Bogota, Colombie, en mai 1981, sous les auspices du CRDI et de la Fondation Ford. Le séminaire a réuni des chercheurs en éducation préscolaire venus de diverses régions du monde et spécialisés dans différentes disciplines. L'éveil précoce des enfants fut examiné à la lumière des études de cas et des programmes nationaux présentés, et analysé en fonction des effets à court et à long terme qu'il peut avoir sur le développement de l'enfant et son succès lors de son entrée dans le système scolaire. Les travaux sont groupés sous trois grands thèmes : recherche et action en éducation préscolaire et primaire; considérations sur le problème de l'éducation préscolaire et primaire; et discussions et recommandations générales.

Resumen

Esta publicación contiene las ponencias presentadas en un seminario sobre la relación entre educación preescolar y primaria, celebrado en Bogotá, Colombia, en mayo de 1981 bajo los auspicios del CIID y la Fundación Ford. El seminario reunió a investigadores de la educación preescolar procedentes de diversas regiones del mundo y con diferentes formaciones disciplinarias. La estimulación infantil temprana fue vista a la luz de los estudios de caso y los programas nacionales presentados, y analizada en función de los efectos que a corto o largo plazo puede tener sobre el desarrollo del niño y su éxito al ingresar al sistema educativo formal. Tres amplias secciones agrupan los trabajos de acuerdo con los temas tratados: investigación y acción en educación preescolar y primaria; consideraciones sobre la problemática preescolar y primaria; y discusiones y recomendaciones generales.

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Conceptual Issues in Preschool and Early Primary Education

Kenneth King¹

Early childhood education and adult education both stand in a somewhat uneasy relationship to the mainstream, formal education. Not being sectors completely linked to state provision, they remain arenas of voluntarism, and partly as a consequence offer a bewildering variety of ideologies, teaching styles, and administrative arrangements. Supporters of early childhood and adult education have long been proud not to be a part of what was seen as the monolithic primary and secondary school system with its sequencing of age, grades, and certification. In a real sense, some of the thinking in childhood and adult education circles has been *anti-school* — on the one hand, viewing the preschool years as the last frontier of freedom before entering a world of regulations and teacher-centred curricula and, on the other, seeing much adult education as having sensitively to pick up the pieces of the many individuals demoralized or rejected by the formal school. In rather different ways both adult and early childhood education have had a strong philanthropic tradition, and have paid considerable attention to the children and young adults of the working poor. At the same time, however, both sectors have also been taken advantage of unduly by the middle and upper classes.

Turning specifically to the early childhood sector, it is not the objective of this paper or this meeting to promote a closer link between preschool and primary school. Given the proud legacy of difference and even hostility, it would be wise to acknowledge that there is perhaps an inevitable tension between the world of childhood and the world of compulsory school. The concern is rather to examine the range and complexity of interactions between preschool and

formal primary school as these affect the mass of poorer children. There are so many different assumptions about the nature and direction of this relationship that it may prove useful to have some of these laid out in the open.

Preschools and Primary Schools: The Child and the Pupil

There is some advantage in being aware of recent preschool patterns in the more industrialized world, even though the scale and coverage of this sector has grown dramatically, to a point where it might appear both quantitatively and qualitatively different from developing countries. Conceptually, however, many issues are very similar when it comes to analyzing the role of early childhood education.

Preschool vs. Primary School

One of the themes that may be expected to emerge in any analysis of these two worlds is the hostility of the primary school environment for many children coming from poorer homes. In countries as diverse as Brazil and India there is a dramatic exodus from primary school in the very year that most children enter it. Something of this dropout or school failure may be attributable to economic reasons, but economic reasons did not apparently prevent enrollment a year earlier. A much greater reason would seem to be factors in the school itself. A combination of teaching styles, conformist pressures forced by large classes, and critical examination barriers (even in the first year of school) manage to sort out tens of thousands of poorer children into deserters, repeaters, and "slow learners" almost as soon as they enter the system.

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As a consequence, one common justification of early childhood education in noncompulsory school systems is not so much to prepare children for school, but to arm them to defeat school. The tendency for unprofessional grade 1 teachers to reinforce the "bright" children and discourage those who seem lost is so widespread that preschools are compelled to play a role of preparation for survival. We shall return shortly to what different interpretations of preparation are possible in this situation, but clearly this preschool perception of the way primary school can function does in no sense imply that preschools are subordinating themselves to primary school preparation. They are not aping primary school methods, but ensuring as a lowest common denominator that preschool leavers can cope with primary school environments.

From this perspective of the hostility of the primary school world, it is important not to underestimate school survival as itself an outcome of preschool education. Studies that emphasize the tendency for test scores of children with and without preschool to even out in the first years of primary do not always admit that whatever the precise cognitive impact of preschool, the children do at least appear to have survived long enough in school to be tested.

Variations on Preschool vs. Primary

We have termed the preschool arena one of the last educational frontiers, within which there is still a great deal of individual variation in institutions. It is, however, a moving frontier, and in parts of Europe and North America, particularly, many "preschool" institutions are really on the formal school side of the frontier. Although termed 4-year-old or 5-year-old kindergartens they are firmly part of the formal school system: 30 children, a single teacher, and a school ethos. This is not to say that wherever preschools are attached to primary schools, or where they become the almost universal antecedent of grade 1, they necessarily lose their autonomy. But in many situations today it will be worth examining whether preschools are really not early versions of grade 1, just as, in colonial Anglophone Africa substandard A and substandard B were direct anticipations of the style and curriculum of grade 1. Even in urban Kenya today it might be more appropriate to allocate the "preschools" to the formal school side of the frontier. Their major role, as has been shown in Gakuru's work², is

²Seminar on preschools in urban Kenya, November 1978, Nairobi.

selecting children for the markedly different types of primary school.

Deciding about the actual function of a preschool is not an entirely academic question. Where preschools are almost universal and compulsory, or where they play a predominant role in sorting children into more and less status-full primary schools, they will tend to anticipate grade 1 work and methods. In cities as different as Edinburgh, Calcutta, and Nairobi, children prepare for and sit exams in preschools to determine entry to the better primary schools. If, then, preschool is itself a sector of sometimes intense competition among middle-class parents, or if it is well nigh universal among the better educated, it becomes more difficult to think of a preschool head start for the poorer children who perhaps need it most. Putting this rather differently, it could be said that the downward extension of formal education into the preschool sector (widespread among the middle classes in developing countries, and well nigh universal in the industrialized world) makes it difficult to use the term head start at all when talking of the poorer classes. Except in a relative sense: even to catch up with the middle class head start, poor children need to be preschoolled. To be more logical, poor children need a prepreschool if they are to start on equal terms at all at age 4 or 5.

Relative Head Starts

Like the word preschool the term head start turns out to be rather elusive. Given the increasing inapplicability of the concept with the widespread coverage of middle-class preschools, it might still have relative value when applied to rural areas, where the middle peasantry have not been incorporated in this form of preschool. As a consequence, it would be possible in *principle* (even if politically unrealistic on any large scale) to conceive of a preschool head start for the lower peasantry. This is in fact what seems to be happening in several different locations in Latin America. Without in any sense challenging the advantage of the urban middle classes, a small head start can still be arranged in rural areas vis-à-vis other sections of the peasantry and small town dwellers. For example, the Parents and Children project in Osorno, Chile, or the Early Childhood Education project in Puno (Pollitt 1979) both work with the poorer communities, and offer their children an earlier education than many other school-goers will achieve.

Perhaps head start is too positive a term for the preparation against primary school failure or

discrimination that we described earlier. A more accurate metaphor might be an insurance (partial cover only) against damage in the first years of primary school.

Preschool Dogmas in Developing Countries

In the last section it was implied that a preschool was not really a preschool if it was very closely incorporated into the formal school system. Clearly this implication might be unacceptable as it had not yet been defined what a preschool was. No simple definition is possible, unfortunately. There are, however, a number of bands along which most varieties of preschool could be placed at some point: anti-school — ante-school, intellectual and social skills — school skills, learning through play and general intellectual activity — learning through the three R's, mothering — teaching, responsive — teacher-initiated, learning to learn — learning "minimum essential learning needs," learning with mother/father — teaching mother/father to teach child, fostering independence — teaching respect, voluntary, community participation — state provision, and educating — caring.

It has not proved possible to group these various bands in ways that would allow very clear characterization of differences in goals, ideologies, and teaching styles. But in general the right-hand side of the spectra suggests more formal, teacher- and school-focused, state provision, whereas the left-hand side of the bands points toward less instrumental curricular objectives and more general concerns with intellectual and social development broadly conceived.

As the concern in this paper is with preschool policies for the poorer sectors of society, this set of alternative directions in preschool emphasis may help to clarify a little the complexity of settling on a single approach. It also helps to suggest how narrow have been some of the measurements of preschool "success."

For example, should policies concerned with compensating for poor intellectual environments at home and in the community develop preschools characterized by some of the qualities on the right of these spectra or skills anticipatory of school concentrating on very specific (minimum) learning objectives? Many would say "yes," that preschools compensating for a hostile home environment and preparing for an equally hostile school environment should teach the lowest common denominator, school-coping skills. This may appear particularly reasonable in poor

countries where it may be necessary to predicate preschools on unqualified staff whose own education may not have gone much beyond primary school. Indeed, elements of this approach are apparent in some of the programs in Latin America, as well as attempts in many countries (developed and developing) to incorporate the mother as a more explicit teacher of her child. However, home visiting elements of many preschool programs have, presumably, a tendency to communicate the letter rather than the spirit of intellectual activity, and may well, in seeking to teach the mother the tricks of the intellectual trade, end up with a small number of school-related suggestions.

The question mark around this perhaps inevitable emphasis on very basic cognitive tasks and skills in compensatory preschool education is that children who ultimately do well intellectually and socially have learnt or begun to absorb a much *less instrumental* approach to knowledge. This is captured very well by Raven (1980) in his recent book, "Parent, Teachers, and Children" from which the following commentary on the fostering of intellectual skills among the higher socioeconomic status (HSES) parents in his sample is taken:

"They [HSES] focus more on fostering success indirectly — by fostering qualities like independence and confidence in dealing with new situations. These qualities may make for increased success at school and, quite independently, for increased success in life. The HSES group make more use of rewards — including the intrinsic reward that comes from successfully undertaking an activity and seeing that it produces the results that are desired. They make much more use of teaching by example — including the example portrayed by others who work hard, handle responsibility well, and themselves behave in highly commendable ways. They promote development by responding to the child and, possibly, thereby reinforce the child's tendency to take initiative, to reason, and to argue with authority. Not only is such behaviour likely to reinforce the child's tendency to engage in it, it is likely to lead the child to think of himself as someone who has a right to opinions and activities of his own, who can independently find information he needs, who is entitled to raise questions about the wisdom of his superiors, and to expect to guide his own behaviour by reference to the long-term good of society rather than the dictates of an authority which both demands instant obedience and is not open to reason."

Reproducing elements of these rather complex intellectual qualities through preschool activity

may seem a rather tall order but in many different settings from Istanbul to Ottawa there are preschools that set themselves this task. Sema Ulcay's Child Welfare Organisation in Turkey, for example, or Kathy Yach's Day Care Centre in Ottawa both see themselves as generating intellectual attitudes that may very well be at variance with patterns of pupil-teacher interaction common in the first years of primary school.

Returning for a moment to the bands or spectra of preschool styles, it is easy to see how the preschool arena has become a battlefield of dogmas and conflicting ideologies. This has perhaps so far been more apparent in the industrialized world than in developing countries; and it may even appear to planners in the latter that the preschool controversies of Europe and North America are a luxury in their own economic situation. However, conflicting approaches to preschool education have already begun to appear in most developing countries, and the task for researchers has correspondingly become one of sorting out what are the various local manifestations of preschool education and what characteristically they are achieving. I turn, therefore, to a few methodological aspects of preschool — primary relations.

Conceptual Issues in the Measurement of Preschool and Primary School Interaction

At the moment, the field of early childhood studies suffers from a lack of adjustment between the action in favour of young children and the reporting upon it; or, to be more accurate, the research results on this sector pertain predominantly to what are the apparently more measurable elements of that very diversified set of activities and programs. Consequently, tightly controlled experimental (and longitudinal) research is most frequently reported. Typically, the central elements in these research results are pre- and post-test scores of various abilities, skills, and attitudes. The discussion is very much concerned with the maintenance of scores on these scales over periods of several years or, alternatively, of initial gains being "washed out." Equally, state-of-the-art reviews on the whole field are extremely partial, reflecting only studies that seem to offer somewhat hard data.

It should be clear from the range of bands along which various preschool programs can be positioned that the decision to regard scores in particular kinds of school and preschool tasks as

a crucial success measure is itself an indication of serious bias. It is likely to favour programs that incline toward the teaching of school skills and is likely to undervalue some of the more complex attitudes to learning and to new knowledge that many of the programs on the left of the spectra seek to develop. Probably in preschool programs research has so far captured only a fraction of what is really transpiring in many of the programs.

Of course in preschool as in the other frontier territory, popular or nonformal adult education, the majority of the programs are excluded from serious study because they are not designed in ways that traditional evaluation methods find appropriate. Only "designer" preschool programs have received serious attention.

Gradually, this is changing in both adult and preschool studies. Programs of mother/child stimulation are beginning to be evaluated in ways that capture the complexity of the interactions between "animators," program organizers, mothers, and children. One example, already referred to, is the evaluation of CIDE's "Parents and Children" program in Chile by a joint group of program participants, CIDE researchers, and Howard Richards.³ Another would be the blend of quantitative and illuminative methods applied by John Raven in his "Parent, Teachers and Children." Both are involved in very different parts of the world (Chile and Scotland) in the evaluation of programs where mothers were being stimulated by "animators" to become better trainers and developers of their preschool children. The consequences, both intended and unintended, of these different interventions are laid bare, as are the many possible interpretations of what may actually be happening. With the introduction of more sensitive evaluation measures it may be anticipated that a much richer understanding of early childhood programs will be possible. Case studies are needed of the early stimulation process at work, of Latin American day-care centres, and of preschools along the spectrum from anti- to ante-school. Equally important, there is a need for transition studies, working in grade 1 classes to tease out the interaction between ordinary teachers and children "with and without 'kinder'."

In the first instance, the impact of such studies will be to raise questions about the usefulness of phrases like "with 'kinder,'" when they cover such a range of often conflicting approaches to early

³A draft document should shortly be available in English and Spanish from CIDE, Erasmo Escala 1825, Box 13608, Santiago, Chile.

education. But, as a result, the debate about the impact of preschool will be dramatically broadened to include insights beyond the present range of "designer" programs. A further consequence of more sensitive evaluation methodologies will be an increased range of meanings for such overused currency as "does preschool *work*" and "is preschool *effective*"?

This trend away from evaluating only the findings of designer studies may seem to make it even more difficult to build an argument about preschools that might impress a policymaker. In actual fact, the opposite might be the case. One weakness of presenting to policy people research results that derive from very carefully designed quasiexperimental interventions may be precisely that the programs appear *insufficiently ordinary*. The research results may be persuasive

but reproducing the small groups and intensive stimulation of many such studies may look quite unrealistic in the economic situation of many developing countries. Paradoxically, there may be much more interest from policy people in learning what can be expected from a very ordinary group of 3- and 4-year-olds being "taught" by a very ordinary caretaker (perhaps a young girl just out of primary school herself), in a very ordinary backyard or home environment.

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