

Learning And Growing, What We Know Of The Very Young Child

**Dr. Rinkal Sharma
Assistant Professor
School of Education
Sharda University
Greater Noida**

Abstract

The education of pre- school child is emerging as a major concern of policy makers in both education and social welfare. Many aspects need clarification-conceptual issues, operational modalities, implementation problems, etc. Few children in the developing world enjoy circumstances even remotely approximating to the ideal. Only those who are socially and economically well-off grow in a stable family, live in spacious homes with garden, and are care for by intelligent parents with the time and energy to spare to support their children's growth. In many of the developing countries, the basic necessities are absent. Mal-nourishment is an acute problem. Deprived of minimum health care, they are prey to disease. Child neglect is widespread. They are forced to work from a tender age. Their access to intellectual influences, whether in the form of knowledgeable elders, books or mass-media is limited, when one considers the demand of tomorrow's world. They become both victims and agents of violence. The general atmosphere in which most children grow is least conducive to their emotional and intellectual growth.

Introduction

In the developing world there is increasingly an awareness of early childhood care and education and its significance at the level of political assertions sometimes included in prestigious statements of government programmes for the very young child, stemming from a concern for children. But the concerns for the Disadvantaged are only now beginning to emerge in the developing world. However there is considerable vagueness and confusion in defining the disadvantaged. This situation is being recognised and some actions towards resolution are being initiated. One aspect of the problem is that of reaching the disadvantaged even when these can be defined acceptably. Another problem is what activities should and could be presented with the physical and human resources available. But prior to any other issue concerning preschool education are the questions

- Who is this pre-school age child covered by the UN declaration of the rights of the child 1959 to whose needs the international Community seems to be waking up slowly and is feeling concerned about the look of conditions and facilities needed for his all-round development?
- What do we know about the physical, intellectual emotional and other aspects of his development?
- How much knowledge do we have about his characteristics at different stages of growth- assuming that there are such stages and how much do we know about his basic needs, biological and others assuming that he has such needs?
- Is there a reasonable consistency to such characteristics and needs or is the variation from one culture to another so extreme that any set of generalization about the average child , if the use of such a term is to be permitted at all, must be considered to be hazardous in the extreme ?

Problems and limitations

There is a lots of problems here:

The first is that as the child is totally dependent for most of his needs on the family, particularly his parents, not much importance is generally given in most cultures to the acquiring of scientific knowledge about his development or for using it for improved parenting purposes. Because of his utter dependence, physically, initially, and continuing defencelessness for years, thereafter, the tendency everywhere is simply to take the child for granted.

Second- the proposition seeking to establish a discernable connection between the early childhood experiences of a child and the kind of personality make-up he eventually he comes to acquire relate to two different stages, separated by such a long period of time in the life of the individual, that, unless the supporting evidence was meticulously recorded and periodically sifted from the very beginning, parents and the acutest of the observers. What compounds the problem is that is that such generalizations, unlike relationship in some other areas of human enquiry, cannot, because of many practical considerations, be even verified or demonstrated to prove their validity. And as if these difficulties were not serious enough, the fact of the matter is that our knowledge about the child and how he develops is so rudimentary that no psychologist or social scientist other than a Watson could make a bold to assert that given a particular kind of environment and upbringing of known specifications, an entirely predictable type of personality would emerge. In dealing with child development we are dealing with a multi-variety situation of extreme complexity. Here the relevant factors, so difficult to separate and identify, do not operate or move in neat linear sequence, but in chains of clusters of concurrent interaction. As such the tools of research and enquiry available to the researcher, as compared to the complexity of the data they are supposed to collect and analyse, are so crude and primitive, that they often break down before reaching the bottom of their probing.

Invariably the result is to get trapped in egg-chicken variety of riddles when it is more a matter of subjective opinion as to which part of the situation is treated as cause and which as effect . Longitudinal studies so crucial for building up a solid knowledge base cannot be mounted frequently or easily because of considerations of logistics, while the scope for controlled experimentation is minimal because of the social and ethical issues such studies raise. These limitations in knowledge and research capacity notwithstanding, however the combined effort of psychologists and sociologists. This is the reason for emergence of early childhood education as a separate field of inquiry.

The importance of the pre-school years-

In the first year of life, the development of intelligence, affectivity and social relations is so rapid that we may consider that its success largely determine the whole future. Any irregularity may unless detected in time. It is during the first or five years of life that many personal behaviours – in language, attitude, values even ways of learning begin to take on the form they will retain for a life time. What kind of research evidence can be cited in support of assertions such as these? Here is a somewhat longish but relevant extract from M.K. PRINGLES*: “Longitudinal research is beginning to provide an understanding of the pattern of human growth. Three quite specific features have emerged which have important practical implications for child rearing:

- FIRST, the development of various basic characteristics does not proceed in equal units per unit of time, i.e. , growth does not take place at an even pace.
- SECONDLY, for most aspects, the period of most rapid growth takes place in the early years and is then followed by periods of less and less rapid growth with a ‘spurt’ at puberty; for some characteristics there is as much quantities growth in a single year of a child’s life as there is in eight to ten years at other stages in his development.
- THIRDLY, available evidence suggests that environmental influences have the greatest effect during the rapid period of growth. From this it follows that it is experience and opportunities during the early years of life which are particularly vital to later development.

Physical development

Height is the most extreme case of the first generalisation referred to above. During the nine months of conception to birth, growth is of same absolute magnitude as it is during the nine years from three to twelve; and from conception to the age of about two and a half years, half the full adult stature is attained. Hence, one would expect that it is pre-natal and during early infancy that the environment has the greatest effect, for better or worse. Available evidence shows this to be so.

Intellectual Development -

As much development takes place in the first four years of the life as in the following thirteen years. It has been estimated that about 50 percent of the intellectual growth takes place between conception and the fourth year, and about 30 percent between the ages of four to eight years. Unlike physical development, however it continues well into adulthood, but the pace become very much slower after eighteen years. With regard to vocabulary, by eight years of age about 50 percent of the level attained by eighteen years will have been reached. Early environmental influences have a marked effect on measurable cognitive functioning. Recent studies suggest that social class differences, affecting language development emerge during the first year of life and become unequivocal by about the age of there.

Emotional and social development -

Precise and objective evidence remains very inadequate in this area. Paradoxically less is known about the development of normal than of deprived disturbed or delinquent children. Two aspects of personality have, however, received particular attention, partly because of their central significance in personal relations and partly because they are more readily observable than other characteristics. These are aggressiveness and dependence on others for support and direction. Difference between boys and girls in the development of these aspects can be noted early and the, sex appropriate, behaviour becomes well established during the preschool years. This suggests that for personality development, to the early years are of great importance. With regard to behaviour and adjustment problems are already apparent among children in infant schools, by which age some 14 percent show considerable difficulties in school. The lower the parental occupational status, the lower tends to be the proportion of well adjusted children.

Educational development –

Available evidence suggests that of a child's general attainment at the age of eighteen, approximately half has been reached when he is about nine years old. However the capacity to respond to, and benefit from, education inevitably depends on the level of the child's intellectual, language and emotional maturity. Therefore it is again experience during the pre-school years which has a vital influence on later scholastic progress. Finding from the National Child Development Study show that even as early as the age of seven years there are marked differences in scholastic attainments between each children coming from each of the five occupational groups in to which the census divides total population during the following four years, these differences in attainment continue to widen , with regard to the children removed from their families., their educational difficulties were found to be more severe, the earlier the child's first separation from home and the less contact the parents had maintained with him subsequently. The differential growth, which takes place during early childhood is presented below in summarized form for the six aspects of development discussed here. It is based on the assumption that growth is more or less complete by the age of eighteen or twenty years. What is shown is the age by which according to Bloom's synthesis of available knowledge –the half way stage of development is reached for each aspect.

Age in years

Height-2

Intelligence -4

Vocabulary -8

Aggressiveness in boys-3

Dependence in girls-4

School Attainments-9

'Sensitive periods'

It is evident then that normally more progress, change and development take place during the first few years of life than in any comparable time thereafter. This is true too of the post natal growth of the brain itself, which is more rapid in the first two years. In the case of young birds and mammals, the existence of 'sensitive' and 'critical' periods over a very wide range of development is incontrovertibly established; during these periods, there is a greatly heightened susceptibility to specific experience, such as stimulation or isolation, which may have a lasting and irreversible effect.

Wither in children's development there are also such 'sensitive' periods during which responsiveness to the environment is maximum- and hence learning optimal- has not yet been quite so clearly demonstrated. The evidence suggests that they do occur but that they are not as 'critical' or fixed as, say, the result of 'imprinting' is in birds. However, there are definite indications that children, too, respond more readily to various environmental opportunities at certain periods: strong emotional relationships, particularly with their mother are developed with their mother, are developed during a relatively circumscribed period; and skills such as walking and talking are usually acquired at roughly similar ages by most children. Conversely, if a child has not learned to speak at all by the age of five years or to read by the age of ten, then it is most unlikely that quite normal speech or reading ability will ever be achieved. At the same time not only are these sensitive or optimal periods of longer duration among the human young but also later learning can and does take place, although it is slower and more difficult than that early period. Childhood experiences have great potency quite beyond doubt, so is the fact that their consequences are often long-lasting and may be very difficult to alter. Of course this does not mean that experiences later in a child's life may not also have a similarly marked or lasting effect on subsequent development. As in more other fields prevention is undoubtedly better than cures. Hence the attention and emphasis now being given to the earliest years, indeed months of life is entirely justified.

Conclusion-

In conclusion, early childhood care and education is enhanced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning. From this perspective, learning and development are inextricably intertwined and are enmeshed within the milieu of social relationships. The child develops not in isolation but in the context of family, neighborhood, community, society and public policies. Children's early learning and development, therefore, is a matter for the whole of society.

References:

French, G. (2007). *Children's early learning and development, Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, Research paper*. Dublin: NCCAN.S 125, Pre-School Education and the world's poorest: An Alternative view, p.10